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The Official Magazine

NOVEMBER 08

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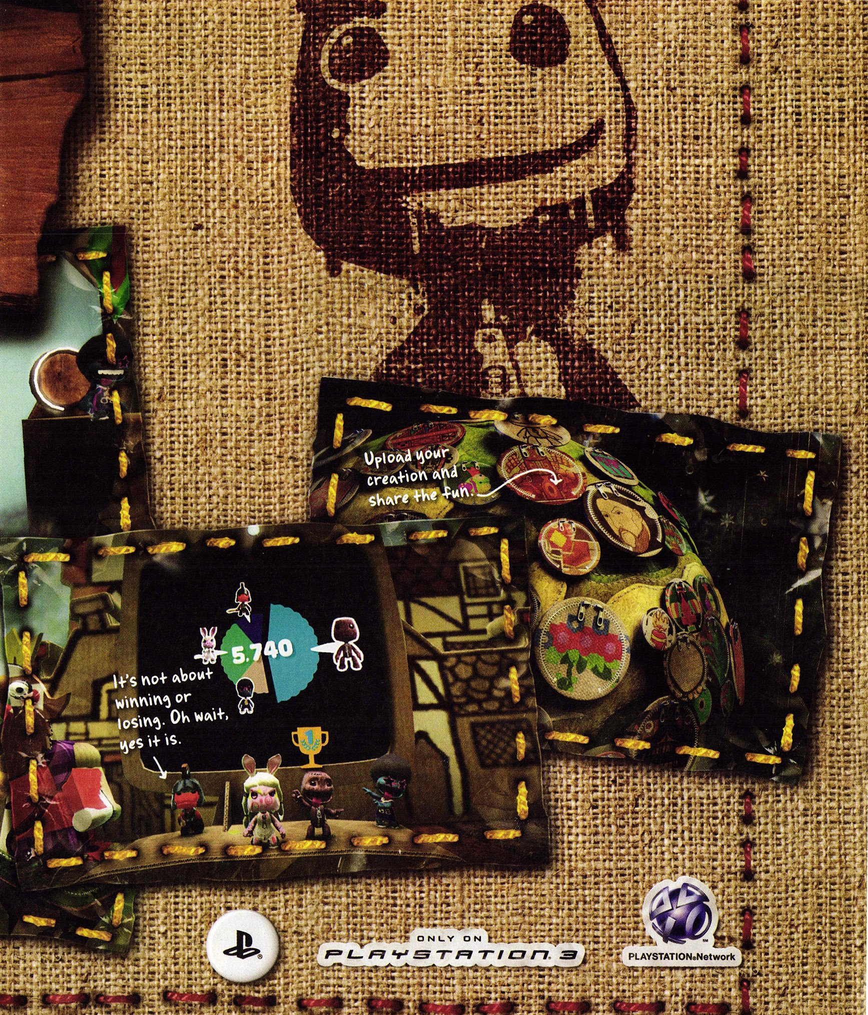
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Contents

November 2008

PlayStation The Official Magazine

☐ PlayStation 3 🟧 PlayStation Portable 🟩 PlayStation Network 🟦 PlayStation 2

Feature

56 RESISTANCE 2

Gigantic metal boots: the latest in alien footwear. Look your best while exterminating mankind. Order today!

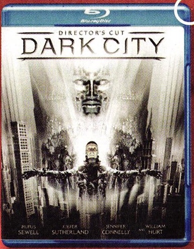
Update

6 Max Payne: Big Screen Action Hero

10 The PlayStation Interview: Rhianna Pratchett

13 **BLU-RAY REVIEWS**

16 PlayStation Digest


Blu-ray Disc
DIRECTOR'S CUT
DARK CITY
RUFUS SEWELL
KIEFER SUTHERLAND
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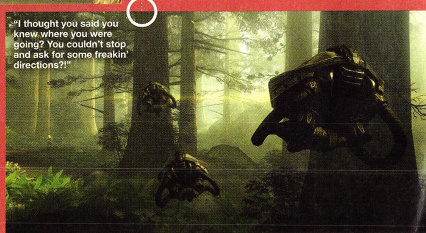
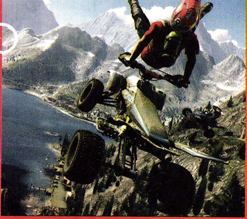
WILLIAM HURT

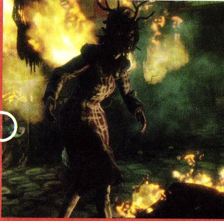


"I thought you said you knew where you were going? You couldn't stop and ask for some freakin' directions?!"

If the good guy looks this creepy, just imagine how freaky the monsters are.



Kids, don't try this at home. Try this on a dirt track in the Italian Alps. It's much prettier.



While partying like it was 1959, this man spontaneously became a statue.

Previews

48 Alpha Protocol
49 Blitz: The League II
32 Call of Duty: World at War
26 **DEAD SPACE**
47 Dissidia Final Fantasy
46 Final Fantasy Agito XIII
46 Final Fantasy Versus XIII
46 Final Fantasy XIII
38 Heavy Rain
47 Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep
52 Legendary
52 LEGO Batman
48 MotorStorm: Pacific Rift
49 Need for Speed: Undercover
53 Silent Hill: Homecoming
30 Skate 2
53 Sonic Unleashed
47 The 3rd Birthday
42 Tomb Raider: Underworld
34 Velvet Assassin

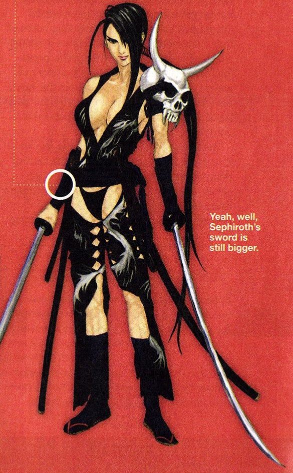
Reviews

79 Baja: Edge of Control
70 **BIOSHOCK**
83 Fading Shadows
89 Ferrari Challenge
76 Mercenaries 2: World in Flames
88 NBA Live 09
86 NHL 09
87 NHL 2K9
78 **PURE**
89 Siren: Blood Curse
80 Star Ocean: First Departure
82 Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09
83 Women's Volleyball Championship
84 **YAKUZA 2**

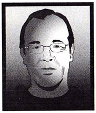
Network

90 **SOULCALIBUR IV SECRETS**
92 PlayStation Network: Updates, Reviews
94 Letters
96 **QORE**

“Man, where *am* I? I really wish I could read Japanese...”



Yeah, well, Sephiroth's sword is still bigger.



Editor's Note

"Your reality, sir, is lies and balderdash and I'm delighted to say that I have no grasp of it whatsoever."

I was watching AMC's brilliant *Mad Men* recently (if you haven't seen it, the first season is available on Blu-ray and iTunes, and is worth every cent) and one episode struck a chord. It was episode four, I think, and it illustrated a young buck showing the wherewithal to get ahead with fresh ideas, only to find himself stifled by an archaic establishment prepared to move forward only at a glacial pace. It made me think for a moment how print magazines used to be a bit like that: Stuck in their ways, afraid of new ideas, spooked by the mere thought of stepping out into the digital frontier. (And then I realized my print magazine didn't yet have a Web site to speak of. We're addressing that, and soon!)

I started in the videogame magazine business before the Internet. Yeah, I'm that old! We, the print enthusiast press, were the first and last word. And would you believe, despite the onslaught of the digital age and information overload, we're still relevant! We understand that today's most valuable commodity is time. How you choose to use that recreation time is vital. As fellow gamers, we know it's spent, well, playing games—and we don't underestimate our responsibility to point you in the right direction. We try to balance your (and our) fascination and expectations of the games that will kick the quality bar up yet another notch, with the critical insight that can only come from long hours of rigorous evaluation alongside years of professional experience. Meanwhile, we're exploring more features that will help you eke out every possible ounce of value from that shiny new PS3 box, so be sure to let me know what parts you want to know more about in the coming months.

But back to that evolution theme. We know that this is the digital age, and we're helping deliver that through outlets such as Qore, which you can download from the PlayStation Store for free using the exclusive code printed on page 96. Better yet, in the coming months I'll have news on our very own Web site, which will give us closer access to you, our lovely readers (and, I suppose, the less-than-lovely ones as well). In the meantime, feel free to pay us a visit on Facebook. Yep, thanks to Scott's efforts we've now got a bona fide "group" on there, so come join in.

"We understand that today's most valuable commodity is time. How you choose to use that recreation time is vital. As fellow gamers, we know it's spent, well, playing games—and we don't underestimate our responsibility to point you in the right direction."

A podcast is also in our future. Now, I've listened to a lot of game site podcasts and they range from immature tosh to slick radio-like production. What would you like to hear from a PTOM podcast? Developer interviews? Contests? Gary spouting on about some crazy Japanese RPG, and the plush toy that he got as a tchotchke? Teresa's tips? Roger's ruminations? Let me know and we'll consider all these as we shape out our complete complement of PlayStation information.

Yes, the pace of our progress is speeding up, and we're going to keep pace all the way. Let me know how we're doing (but don't remind me about the Web site…I know, it's coming!)

Rob

"Quote" contest

Enter to win a Blu-ray movie! Unless you're a first time reader (in which case, welcome) you should know that the headline at the top of this column is a quote from a movie. Identify the movie, send your answer (along with your name and shipping address) to **PTOM_editor@futureus.com** with Ed Note November in the subject line. I'll pick one lucky winner at random to receive a Blu-ray movie. I'll be sending one out to James Owen of Merrimack, NH, who identified the quote from *The Insider.*

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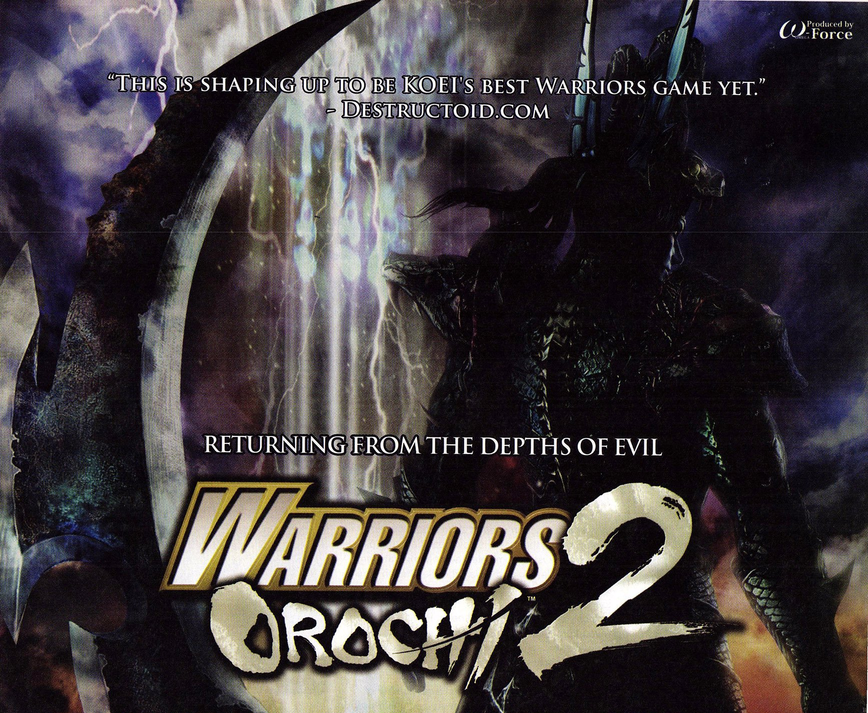

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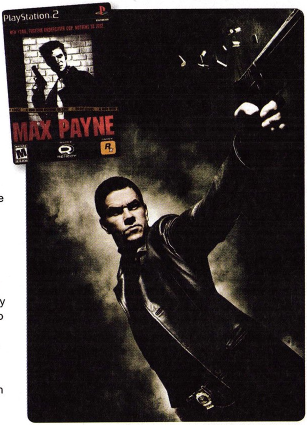
30th KOEI

HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD

MAX PAYNE: BIG SCREEN ACTION HERO

We have hopes—pretty high hopes—that the cast and crew attached to bringing the dour star to silver screen life will hit all the right notes. John Gaudiosi chased down the principals to get all the details.



Hollywood can work fast when it wants to. After over a decade of development hell, the movie version of Remedy/3D Realms' PC, then PS2 action hit *Max Payne* was filmed outside of Toronto during the winter of early 2008. Helmed by acclaimed action director John Moore (*Behind Enemy Lines*), the movie is now heading to the big screen with Oscar-nominated actor Mark Wahlberg in the title role. Along the way, the PlayStation family of consoles played a role in bringing this iconic hero to Hollywood.

"I only ever played *Max Payne* on PS2," says Hollywood producer Scott Faye, who has shepherded the game through its movie development since he first saw concept art of the title at E3 way back when it was still held in Atlanta. "My main system of the time was PS2. We passed around a fair number of copies of the PS2 version of *Max Payne* for Hollywood executives to play as part of the pitch process."

Moore is not a gamer today because, like golf, he says, he knows he sucks at it. But his first introduction to gaming came on the original PlayStation console, which he used to play Sony's F1 racing games—complete with steering wheel peripheral. Although he played *Max Payne* on PC as preparation for his cinematic adaptation, he keeps an eye on what the game industry, and PlayStation 3, is doing.

"I have my own production company, so it's important to keep up with games as one of the great source materials for movies," says Moore.

When it comes to source material, Moore believes *Max Payne* stands on its own in the game universe as a story that just cried out to be re-interpreted for the big screen.

"You don't sense that there's resistance from the format, from this piece of art," says Moore. "I can't be respectful enough to the game. It's a great story game. It's a great action movie, and we've moved the story forward."

While actors Mila Kunis (see sidebar) and Chris "Ludacris" Bridges had both played *Max Payne* on PS2, Wahlberg—who's not a gamer because (as he describes himself) of his addictive personality—had no idea that the script he was sent was even based on a game.

"When I read the script, I said this is awesome, and I asked where it came from; when they said it was based on a videogame, I said, "$*!$*, no! I don't want to do that," half-jokes Wahlberg. "And then they said I had to check the game out. I did some research and then when I saw the game I was surprised at how elaborate the story was. There was a lot going on there. I was surprised they hadn't made a movie out of this before."

As part of his daily preparation for playing the role of Max Payne on set outside of Toronto, Canada, Wahlberg had his assistant play the game every day from the start of production until the day it wrapped.

"It was funny because I have a couple of people who work with me—not as big as the entourage from the old days [as chronicled in the hit HBO series "Entourage," of which Wahlberg is executive producer]—

Also In Production

LOST PLANET
Expected Release Date: February 2011
People Involved: David Hayter (voice of Solid Snake/writer of *X-Men* and *X2*), screenplay writer; Avi Arad (founder of Marvel Studios), producer
Distributor: Warner Brothers
Status: Information is scarce since the film is still in the early pre-production stages, but we're quite sure it's going to happen since Capcom spent its entire E3 press conference announcing it.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME
Expected Release Date: May 28, 2010
People Involved: Jake Gyllanhaal as Prince Dastan, Alfred Molina as Sheik Amar, Ben Kingsley as Nizam; Mike Newell, director; Jordan Mechner (creator of the series), screenplay writer/executive producer; Jerry Bruckheimer, producer
Distributor: Disney
Status: This one's currently filming in Morocco. No word on how closely the plot of the movie will follow the game, but Jordan Mechner's involvement suggests that the film adaption will be at least somewhat faithful to its source material.

BIOSHOCK
Expected Release Date: 2010
People Involved: Gore Verbinski (*Pirates of the Caribbean*), director; John Logan (*The Aviator, Sweeney Todd*), screenplay; Ken Levine (creator of the game), story
Distributor: Universal Studios
Status: As with *Lost Planet*, the groundwork is still being laid for this one, but recent comments from Take-Two Chairman Strauss Zelnick indicate that he and his company are committed to making the film happen. And of course, we're happy to see that *BioShock* mastermind Ken Levine is involved.

With a strong film noir feel, it only made sense that *Max Payne* would eventually become a movie with...a strong film noir feel. Note the carefully constructed camera angles and poses, meant to evoke the original game.

and none of them wanted to be around me when I signed on to do this movie because they knew I was going to be Max," he explains, staying in character throughout the shoot. "I can't be Max and beat up Mila [Kunis] off camera so I had to beat up them. I loved playing this kind of character."

Being a gamer herself, Kunis was really skeptical when she was offered the role of Mona Sax because so many times movies based on games just aren't very good (we're looking at you, Mr. Boll).

"As a fan of games you look forward to them being on film, but so many times it's not what you want it to be," explains Kunis. "When I read the script I was so happy that it stayed true to the game. If you played the game, there are so many little things for the players in this movie. Forget the characters, because they're always going to be there. But the locations and the scenes and the camera angles are all taken straight from the game."

Producer Scott Faye says that's because screenwriter Beau Thorne went back to the game and researched the narrative and character underpinnings of the game franchise.

"One of the best turns in the development of the project was that Beau saw a great relevance in the corporate conspiracy back story that really is essential to the adaptation of the game into a film," adds Faye.

The main elements of the story and the dark atmosphere and film noir feel of the game have all been captured on film, according to director John Moore. He adds that *Max Payne* will stand out in its theatrical form because its hero's journey is so different from what action fans are used to. There's no going back for Payne after his wife and child are brutally murdered. But there's a good chance that Wahlberg will return to this role—something he normally shies away from.

"If people love *Max Payne*, then I hope we can make another one that's better, or at least as good as the first. I'd be interested in doing something with this character again," says Wahlberg.

Moore concurs, saying that he'd love to work with Wahlberg again within this rich universe. As for the direction of a potential sequel, Faye says talks haven't even begun, so he's not sure if they'd pull elements or story from the game sequels or set out in an original direction.

Based on the buzz this game adaptation created at Comic-Con, and the $147 million Wahlberg's *The Happening* took worldwide this past summer, another *Max Payne* adventure on the big screen seems very likely.

Mila Kunis Likes to Play Games

The actress best known for playing Jackie Burkhart on "That '70s Show" and Meg Griffin on "Family Guy" spends most of her free time playing videogames with her longtime boyfriend, Macaulay Culkin of *Home Alone* fame. Although Mila Kunis has every game console on the market, she only plays games on PlayStation 3. Kunis discusses her love of all things PlayStation in this exclusive interview.

What role do you play in the new *Max Payne* movie?
My sister gets murdered and I blame *Max Payne* for that. I go and [language, young lady] him up and then realize that he didn't do it.

Being a gamer, were you familiar with the *Max Payne* game before this role came along?
I had played *Max Payne* when I was at "70s." Wilmer (Valderrama) was the one who played the Bond games and he had Max Payne when it first came out. I played it up there [on set]. I wasn't good at it. Shooter games and I don't get along very well. It was a really cool game. And it was exciting to play. You take the drug and everything slows down...

Did your knowledge of the game help when bringing Mona Sax to the big screen?
I think it's just the feel of the character. You play the game and it's very dark and very film noir. There's not much color. It's still a videogame, so you take it for what it is. For the rest you just go with the writing.

Did you play games on the set of Max Payne?
No, but Ludacris had a console on set. [Actor] Donal Logue is an old friend of mine and it was the first day of production and I busted into this trailer thinking it was his and there's Chris sitting on the couch with two of his buddies playing PlayStation. They had this full-on hook-up of videogames in the trailer. They were much smarter than I was.

What games are you playing these days on PS3?
I played *Grand Theft Auto*. I'm not really good at that game. I crashed my car way too many times. I wasn't a big fan of the last *Grand Theft Auto, San Andreas*. And then this new one I think is awesome, but I suck at it. I keep crashing the damn car. It took me way too long to get past the first date. My boyfriend says I like the new game more because it's all about my people—the Russian mob.

Are there any other games you really like to play?
Assassin's Creed is insane. That one looked amazing. I had a lot of fun. Killing people in that game was way too much fun. I was really good at sneaking up on them and then running away and hiding after killing them. You put your little hood on and blend into the crowd.

Kristen Bell provided a voice for *Assassin's Creed*. What are your thoughts about the roles videogames open up to actors today?
I think it's really fun. I know K-Bell really liked doing the game. I was like "did you play it," and she was like, "Well, not really." And I was like, "Oh, never mind." But why not? You want the characters in the videogames to be realistic, so why not hire actors to do it.

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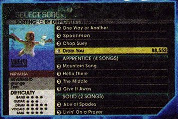

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- One Way or Another
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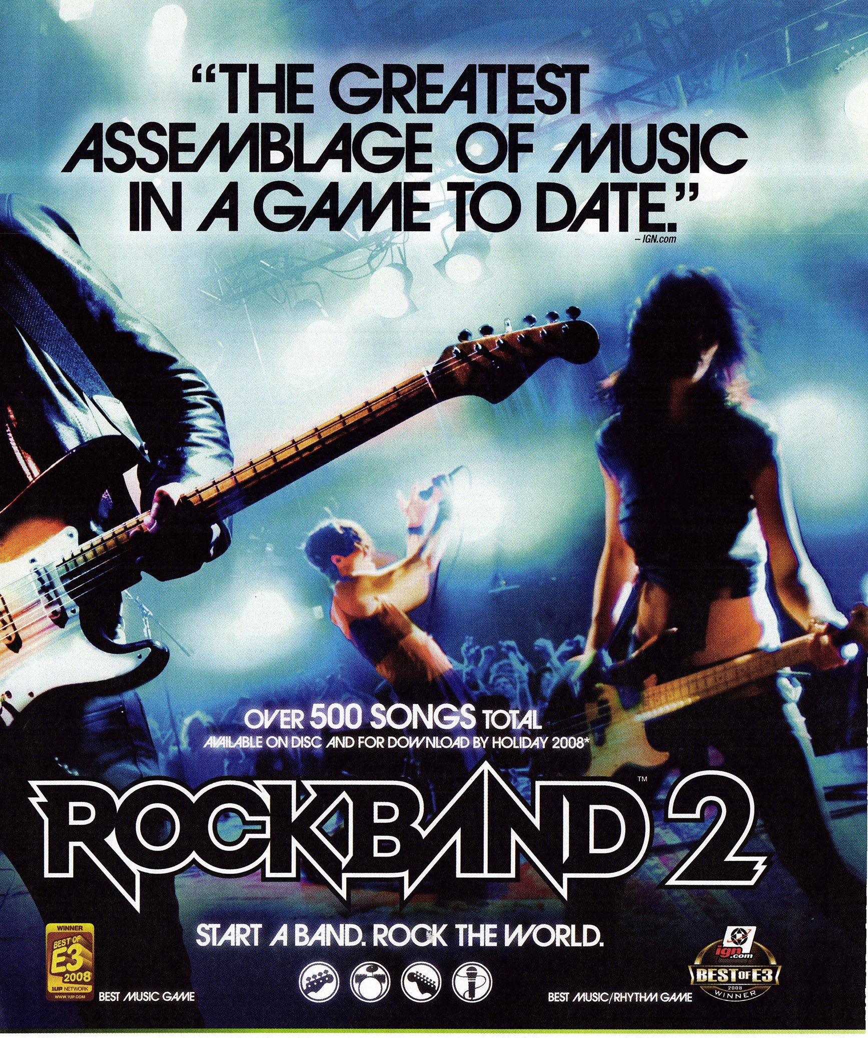
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» OFFICIAL PLAYSTATION INTERVIEW

RHIANNA PRATCHETT

Hailing from the U.K., Rhianna Pratchett might not be a household name in the U.S., but plenty of her games are. The writer behind *Heavenly Sword* and *Overlord* started out as a staffer on the U.K.'s *PC Zone* magazine, only to decide to "pursue the pajama-based life of a freelancer" until she was offered a position writing *Beyond Divinity* (PC, 2004). Since then Pratchett has been responsible for crafting the stories behind several hits, with her latest project, *Mirror's Edge,* due out on PS3 later this year.

PTOM: Was your choice of career motivated by a personal love of gaming?

Rhianna Pratchett: I'm a longtime gamer (since I was about six years old) and I like to pursue the unconventional. I trained as a journalist, but I'm not really sure that my tutors ever saw reviewing, previewing, and writing features about games as *proper* journalism. It definitely wasn't in the curriculum. Certainly, I got my first writing gigs because friends, who needed their commission slips filled, knew I liked games.

How and to what extent does gameplay impact your approach to writing the story?

Fairly majorly. I'm writing stories for the gameplay; they're not games playing my stories. (Although, who knows, maybe one day…) Gameplay and genre have a big impact on the kind of story you can tell and the means by which you can tell it. So being a gamer certainly lends itself well to understanding the needs of gameplay.

Do you have to tailor your story to fit the game or is the game built around the plot?

Most of the time, it's the former. Developers will usually focus on gameplay and level design, before the details of a story and characters are worked out. There might be some semblance of a story idea in place, a partial cast, maybe, before I come onboard, but usually building all that is my job. The exception is *Heavenly Sword,* which had a first-draft script in place when I came onto the project. Although that still required lots of work to flesh out the characters, scenes, and journeys. By and large, it's game first, story later—but we're slowly moving toward more of a hand-in-hand relationship.

How did you get involved with *Heavenly Sword, Mirror's Edge,* and *Overlord?*

Basically, a lot of networking—making contacts in the industry and buying a lot of drinks. I was lucky in that all three of those projects found me. *Mirror's Edge* also involved two (possibly gay) tortoises. But someone has to buy *me* a drink to hear that one.

Speaking of *Mirror's Edge,* how do you write for a character that's never really seen?

It's amazing how attached you can get to a voice and how much emotion can be portrayed by a good voice actor. You just have to pay extra attention to the clarity of the dialogue and its relationship to the gameplay. Plus, work carefully with your actors to make sure they understand the context and delivery needs. Characters you don't see, but do hear, can be great aids to interactivity. Gnarl, your evil mentor in *Overlord,* is mostly conveyed through voice as he speaks telepathically as you explore the game world. Likewise, Merc, Faith's Tracker in *Mirror's Edge,* mainly speaks via a little communication unit in Faith's ear—just techie telepathy, really!

What can you tell us about the world of *Mirror's Edge?* How will it distinguish itself from other dystopias?

The city in *Mirror's Edge* isn't really a dystopia. We are genuinely trying to do something a bit different. If anything, it's a Nanny State taken to extremes. For many of the people that live in it, it's a utopia. It's a city that works well. It's a city that cares. It's a city whose white-tooth-filled-mouth would make a little "ting" noise when it smiled. It genuinely wants its citizens to be well-housed, well-schooled, healthy, and secure voters, and will do anything in its power to achieve that. What's more disturbing about this city is not so much what the authorities have done, but the fact that people have allowed them to do it; that civil liberties have been given up willingly for a comfortable life, for the greater good. But then paradise always has a price.

Were parkour and free-running interesting aspects to integrate into the storyline?

They certainly were. I focused a lot on the freedom of movement and about how pushing your body can give comfort to your mind. There's certainly an underlying theme about the nature of mental and physical freedom.

Both *Mirror's Edge* and *Heavenly Sword* feature strong female leads. Was this intentional?

I'm not entirely sure you can do this kind of thing accidently—but yes, as far as I'm aware they were always going to have female leads. The industry can be a little unsophisticated about its character depiction. And in all fairness, this goes for male characters as well as female ones. The ripped, gun-totting, all-action hero, is as much of a cliché as any female character that was ever forced into a chain-mail bikini.

Do you think a strong storyline plays a much more important role in a game's success?

I think it's started to, yes. The cracks, when held up to other entertainment forms, have become all too apparent. It's starting to be properly addressed, though. Developers are taking narrative more seriously and there are a lot more professional writers and narrative designers about, these days.

What kind of advice would you give someone looking to get into writing games?

Firstly, have a read of the two books that the IGDA Writers' Special Interest Group has produced: *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing* (edited by Wendy Despain) and *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames* (edited by Chris Bateman). They're full of really useful information from working professionals. Secondly, play a lot of games, make sure you have a good understanding of gameplay. Lastly, go to as many game events, conferences, and talks as you can and reach out, make contacts, network; you never know where it may lead.

In general, games are much less linear to write for than other entertainment forms. They usually require a strong knowledge of the gameplay and level design, to do right. The saying "Writing is rewriting" has never been more appropriate than for games writing, because the needs of a game can change so much during a development cycle. This requires a huge amount of flexibility on the part of the writer. Plus games writing is still a fairly new discipline, so you're often dealing with people that have some pretty unrealistic expectations of how the creative writing process works. So partly your role is as an educator, as well. Have I put you off, yet?

Rhianna Pratchett 411

AGE: 31

GAME THAT GOT ME INTO GAMING: *Mazogs* on the ZX81

FIRST JOB: Washing Hair

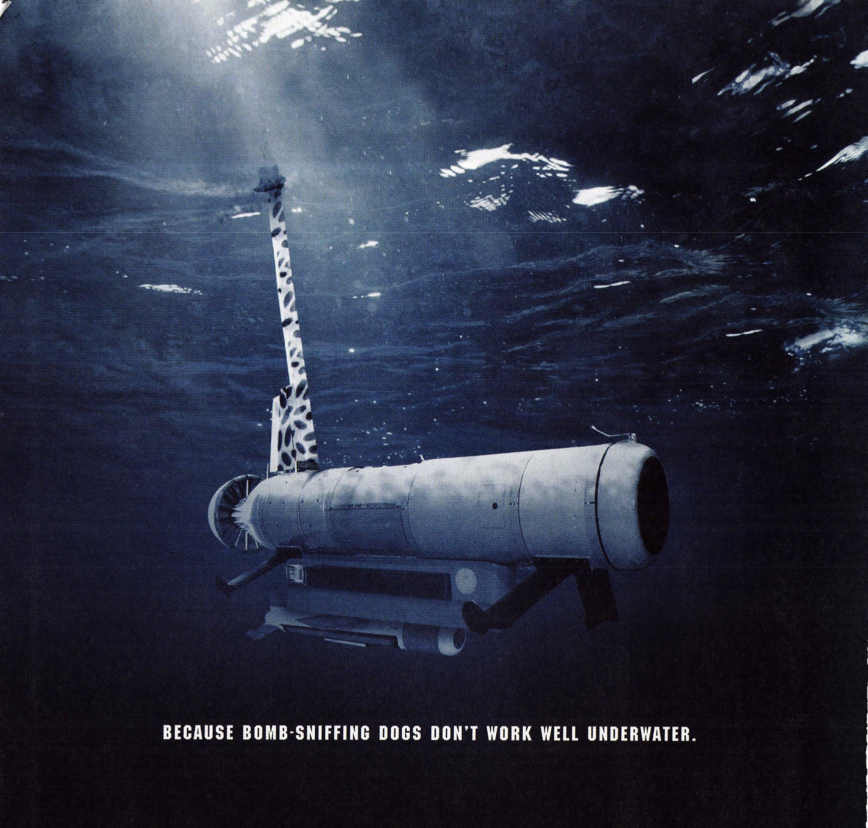
BACKGROUND: Former games journalist

FAVORITE GAMES: The *Thief* games, anything by the late, great Bullfrog Studios, *Vampire: Bloodlines, BioShock, Portal, Half-Life 2, Psychonauts, Planescape Torment, Project Zero, Age of Mythology, Evil Genius, World of Warcraft*, and the *Diablo* games, to name but a few.

FAVORITE BOOK: *Frankenstein* or *My Family and Other Animals* (for a comfort read)

FAVORITE WRITER: William Goldman

HERO: Mary Shelley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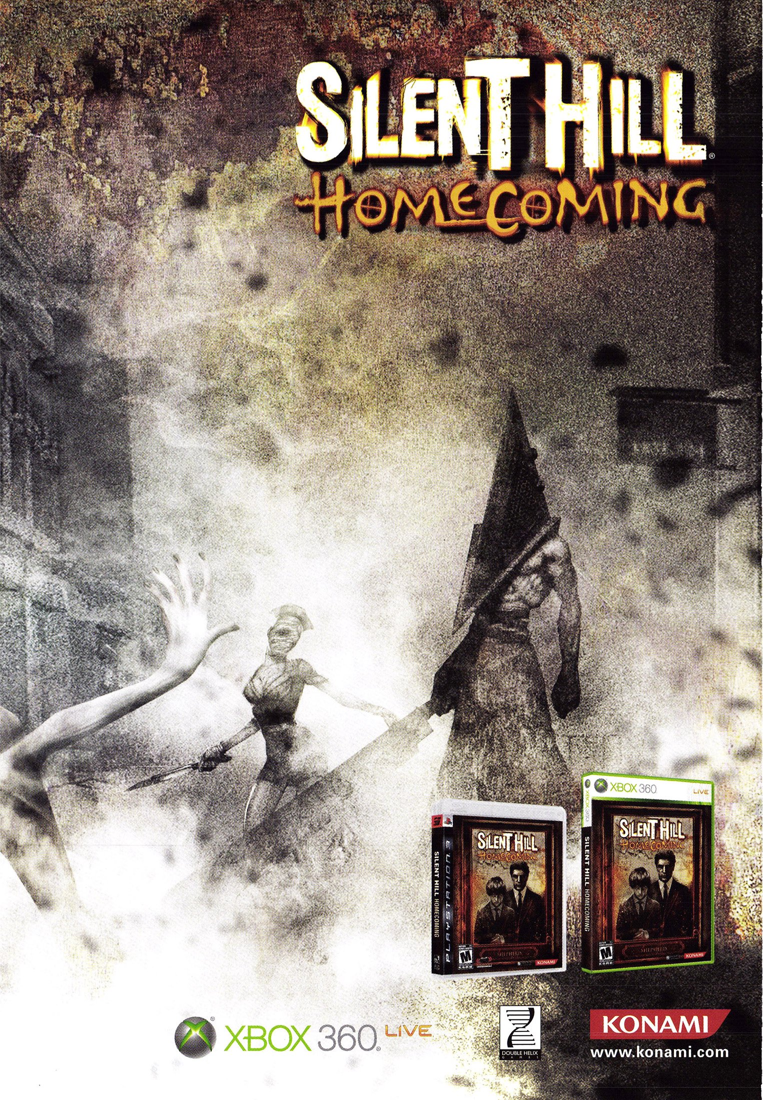
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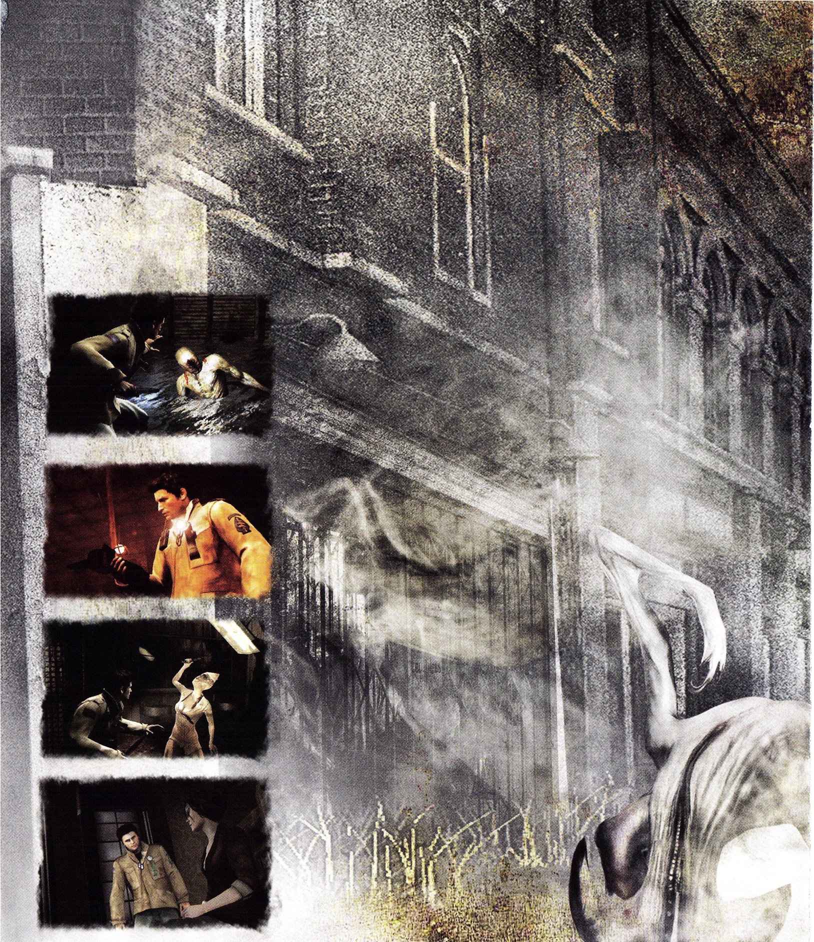

MATURE 17+

M

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language
Sexual Themes

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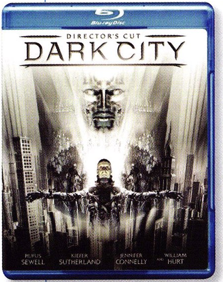
Blu-ray Central

Never talk to strangers!

This month: sci-fi great and bad, thinking man's martial arts, and tense action flicks you probably haven't heard of.

PlayStation: The Official Magazine
PICK OF THE MONTH



Dark City Director's Cut

PRICE: $28.99 **RATED:** R/UNRATED

| MOVIE | Ten years after first appearing in theaters, *Dark City* remains one of the few sci-fi movies of our generation that truly deserves classic status. Much like *Blade Runner*, the director's cut of *Dark City* is mostly subtle changes—the opening scene has been shifted and the monologue removed to slow the starting pace and increase the mystery of the city; an additional 11 minutes of footage has been restored. It's not a monumental change, but the effect adds to the gorgeous atmosphere. The movie itself is, as it always was, a beautiful and often brilliant homage to film noir, the *Twilight Zone*, comic books, and philosophy—and the Blu-ray version makes the incredible visuals even more stunning. While there are certainly aspects of the movie for detractors to nitpick, *Dark City* is an incredible journey well worth taking.

| EXTRAS | When New Line released *Dark City* on DVD, it was packed with a cornucopia of extras, including multiple, excellent commentary tracks. One came from Roger Ebert, who has been a proponent of the movie since it first released. The BD version has five commentary tracks, including expanded editions of those commentaries for the new cut. Ebert's commentary remains the most interesting, with the director's a close second. Beyond that, each version of the movie has separate extras, with a variety of making-of features (some of which go overboard about the psychological and philosophical aspects of the movie) along with essays and a photo gallery. The director's cut "fact track" feature is especially welcome, as it details all the changes while watching the new version. This is one of the few films that deserves the hefty extras treatment, and it delivers on all fronts.

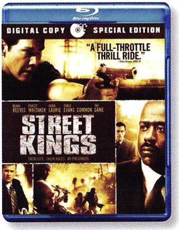
MOVIES ★★★★½
EXTRAS ★★★★½

Meet Jason D'Aprile

This month we're pulling back the curtain to reveal the voice, the cynic, the weird movie tastes of the man behind our Blu-ray review section. (So send him the hate mail at PTOM_bluray@future.us.com).

Jason D'Aprile is a freelance writer, gamer, and home-theater nut whose byline has appeared throughout the industry since about 1992. He's old enough to have seen the original *Star Wars* in the theater, and his first game system was Pong. He doesn't miss the old days.

Favorite under-rated movies: *Mystery Men*, *Chronos*, *Critters*
All-time favorite: If I had to pick, it might be *Aliens* or *Casablanca* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*...hell, it could be *Spider-Man 2* or *The Dark Knight*. Depends which way the wind is blowing.
Most hated movies: On an emotional level, *Deep Impact* and *The Patriot*, both of which I do, in fact, have a nearly irrational hatred for.



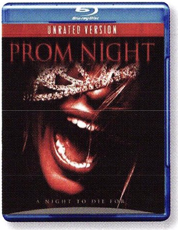
Street Kings

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | Despite being nearly completely overlooked at the theater, *Street Kings* is a surprisingly tense and violent look at very different types of police corruption. Scribed by *LA Confidential* author James Ellroy, it's not up to that level of maze-like intrigue, but still provides plenty of thrills and twists. Equal parts cop thriller and badass action, the movie will hopefully find its audience on home video.

| EXTRAS | *Street Kings* comes packed with a variety of extras. Director David Ayer also made *Training Day*, and his commentary shows a keen knowledge on the subject matter. While the rest of the extras cover the usual suspects of making-of videos, alternate and deleted scenes, and trailers, there's certainly enough to keep any fan occupied for a while.

MOVIES ★★★½
EXTRAS ★★★½



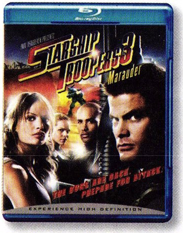
Prom Night

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** UNRATED

| MOVIE | Another slasher aimed at the teenage set (and a remake to boot), *Prom Night* might be unrated on Blu-ray, but it's PG-13 through and through. Tame violence, dumb characters, and not a shred of potentially redeeming T&A...it's hard to say who would find this movie scary or fun. It's also noteworthy for having one of the most laughably lame killers in recent years—a disturbed ex-teacher who kills with a pocketknife.

| EXTRAS | If you're into awkward and usually pointless director and cast commentary, *Prom Night* is for you! Tidbits about the production and filming antics occasionally pop up, but this is a movie that shouldn't have bothered. Beyond that, there's merely the usual thrown together making-of featurettes about how different the movie is from the other slashers, along with deleted scenes, a gag reel, and a not-so-alternate ending. The BD-Live support is just trailers for other movies.

MOVIES ★
EXTRAS ★★½


STARSHIP TROOPERS 3
Marauder
THE BUGS ARE BACK. PREPARE FOR ATTACK.
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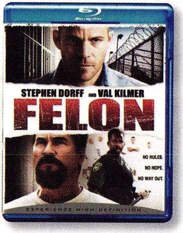
Starship Troopers 3: Marauder

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | Given that the original *Starship Troopers* was a remarkably good sci-fi flick, it's not surprising that they made sequels. What is surprising is how bad these straight-to-video knock-offs are. Admittedly, *Starship Troopers 3* is far better than its unwatchably bad predecessor. Despite the terrible, over-the-top acting and dialogue, and clearly B-grade budget, a few bits of entertainment can be gleaned here—mostly the use of the battle suits so sadly missing from the original. The rest of the movie is lame fodder for a slow night on the Sci Fi Channel.

| EXTRAS | Aside from two occasionally amusing commentary tracks that talk a lot about the low budget, the nude scene, and other aspects of the movie, there's a picture-in-picture commentary mode, and a hoard of making-of extras. The BD-Live support is creative as well, allowing you to email a headshot in and then see yourself in a scene from the movie.

MOVIES ★★
EXTRAS ★★★½



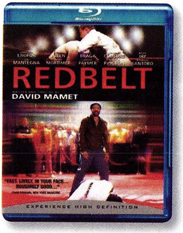
Felon

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | Prison flicks aren't usually meant to be warm and fuzzy, but *Felon's* depiction of life behind bars might make you wish they were. It's a gritty, harsh film about a man sent to hard time after accidentally killing a home invader—not a new concept. Where *Felon* adds to the genre is how it expands on the outside life of the guards, the main character's wife, and even Val Kilmer's secondary role as mass murderer.

| EXTRAS | The measly extra included here is just a run-of-the-mill making-of video that talks up the gritty realism of the movie. There is BD-Live support as well, but, as usual, even this is nearly pointless so far, with the same array of BD trailers for download that we've seen on most of the current crop of BD-Live discs.

MOVIES ★★★½
EXTRAS ★



Redbelt

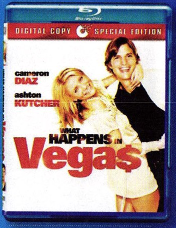
PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | David Mamet movies are seldom simple affairs, relying on layers upon layers as the characters and plot intertwine. *Redbelt* is one of his most accessible stories though. It's a brilliantly acted tale of a martial arts master's seemingly random encounters with a variety of characters—from a female lawyer suffering a nervous breakdown, to loan sharks, agents, fighters, and a big-screen action hero—and the consequences he suffers. Although some action scenes are excellent, *Redbelt* isn't an action movie. For anyone looking for an intellectual excursion in pro fighting however, it's a welcome experience.

| EXTRAS | *Redbelt* comes with shorts on mixed martial arts, David Mamet, and the movie in general. None of the included extras are terribly interesting, though. The director's commentary is rather slow-paced, but Mamet's insight into his unique method of storytelling is still engaging.

MOVIES ★★★★
EXTRAS ★★★

AND FOR THE LADIES



What Happens in Vegas

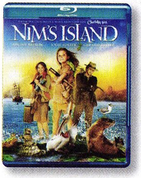
PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | We don't normally associate Ashton Kutcher with good cinema, and yet this latest vehicle for the former *That '70s Show* star is undeniably funny and even occasionally hilarious. Cameron Diaz and Kutcher have great adversarial chemistry, the usual side characters are played up for laughs, and the humor—though often in the gutter—is much more date-friendly than *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* or *Superbad*.

| EXTRAS | Most of the extras are played for laughs, and are generally at least moderately amusing if incredibly slight. Deleted and extended scenes are included as well, and a generally amusing director's commentary rounds out the presentation.

MOVIES ★★★½
EXTRAS ★★★

KIDZ KORNER



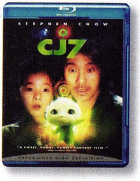
Nim's Island

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG

| MOVIE | Despite the glut of kid fantasy novels-turned-movie, there haven't been many real-world adventures for the tweener set lately. *Nim's Island* certainly has elements of the fantastic, but is otherwise a sweet and family-friendly adventure about a girl, her island, and animal friends that juxtaposes with the life of an agoraphobic adventure writer. It's fun, watchable, and especially sure to entertain tween-age girls.

| EXTRAS | *Nim's Island* is equally notable because it's the first Blu-ray we've encountered with extras—including a commentary track—aimed at kids. The adventure track feature Jodie Foster and *Nim* actress Abigail Breslin talking all about the animals, the island, and various facts and stories related to the movie that are much more kid-friendly than standard commentary tracks. A director's track provides more nuts and bolts commentary, and both tracks are surprisingly engaging.

MOVIES ★★★½
EXTRAS ★★★★



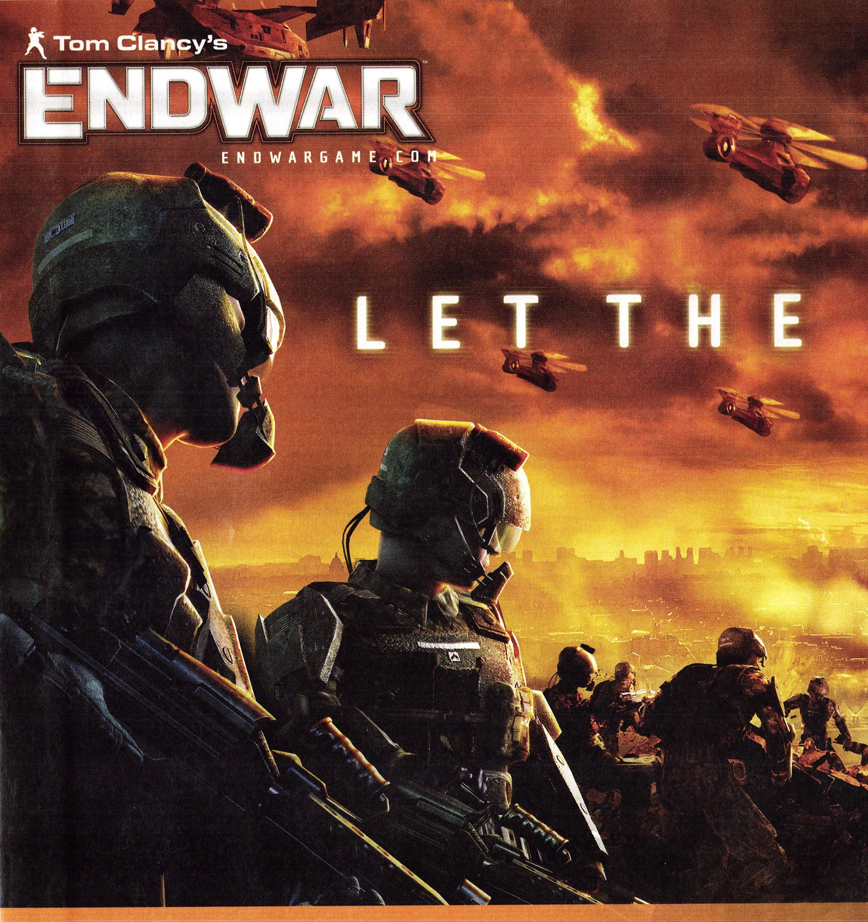
CJ7

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** PG

| MOVIE | *CJ7* is a kid's movie from Stephen Chow, and it's very odd. Occasionally cute and funny, it's also at times tragic and surprisingly harsh and abusive. The story of a poor bullied boy and his father who discover a cute little alien dog has all the usual elements you expect, yet the Asian flavor makes it distinctly offbeat. Unfortunately, almost none of the characters—especially the protagonists—are actually likeable, and most are outright mean-spirited.

| EXTRAS | Strangely, *CJ7* includes commentary in Cantonese, with subtitles. Unfortunately, it's still not very interesting. Most of the other extras are aimed at the younger set, but are bizarrely bad—a misguided video on the rules of dealing with bullies that will probably result in an ass kicking, and how to make a fake lollipop. The disc is BD-Live enabled, but, again, don't expect anything of value there either.

MOVIES ★★
EXTRAS ★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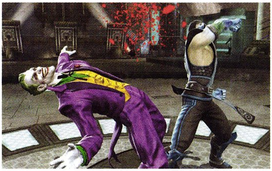
PlayStation Digest

Top Stories, Industry Bits, and Oddities



I Challenge You!

MORTAL KOMBAT
- Jax
- Kitana
- Liu Kang
- Scorpion
- Shang Tsung
- Sonya Blade
- Sub-Zero

DC UNIVERSE
- Batman
- Catwoman
- The Flash
- Green Lantern
- The Joker
- Shazam
- Superman
- Wonder Woman

With the kookiest krossover koming soon to our PS3s, we couldn't help but stir up a bit of a brouhaha when we asked the team behind *Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe* if they think they're Kharacters are tougher than DC's. Their responses:

"It's a tough call. They have their hardcore characters and we have our hardcore characters. Ours might be a little darker, though."

—Steve Beran, art director

"That's the thing we had arguments with DC about. They think all their characters are gods. And we're like, 'What? We can handle your characters too. We have magic.' To me, they're kind of equal, and that's what we tried to make sure happened. But I think they have a couple of characters that are severely overpowered—you can guess which ones I'm talking about."

—John Vogel, story and cinematic director

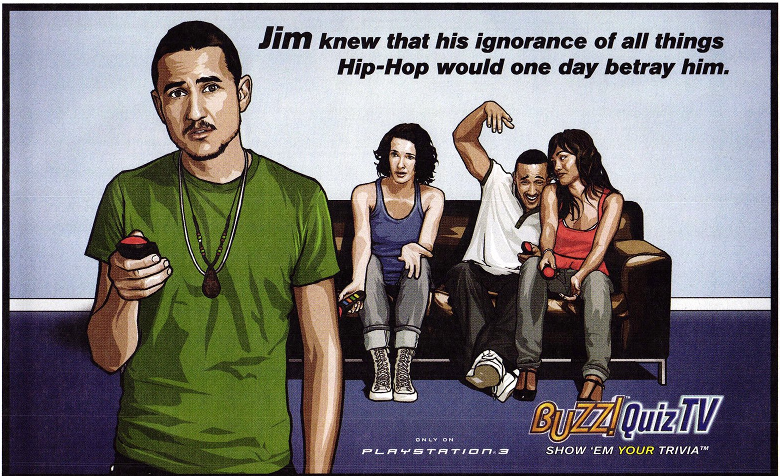
"*Mortal Kombat* universe."

—Ed Boon, creative director

"They're both pretty tough. It's like picking a gang in your neighborhood. Either way, when you walk down the street they're gonna beat you up."

—Jimmy Palmiotti, writer (DC)

Without a definitive answer, we'll have to determine a winner ourselves when Midway's mash-up brawler comes out this November. Meanwhile, feast your eyes on the currently announced partial roster of characters.



Jim knew that his ignorance of all things Hip-Hop would one day betray him.
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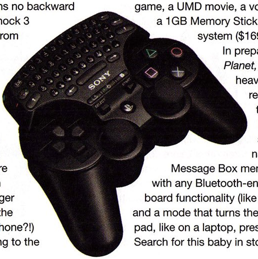
Hard(ware) Choices

Oh goodie. Just when we got comfortable with our current PlayStation models, SCEA has to go and unveil some newer ones. Great news for those of you who have yet to purchase a PS3 or PSP—these new systems come packed with more memory or better screen resolution, so what're you waiting for? As for that mini-keyboard: We wants one. Oh yes we do.

The *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* PS3 Bundle will ship in November for $499.99. It'll include the newly announced (and huge!) 160GB PS3 system with the same functionality as the new 80GB system (which unfortunately means no backward compatibility), a copy of *Uncharted,* a DualShock 3 controller, and a voucher to download *PAIN* from the PSN. A great deal, considering it's the same price as the *Metal Gear Solid 4* bundle (rumored to be running out of stock) but features twice the hard drive space.

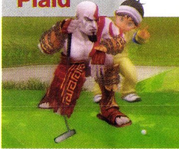
Didn't we *just* get a new PSP model? But the folks at Sony must never rest, because later this year, they're rolling out the PSP-3000. It'll have the same dimensions as the PSP-2000 (the PSP "slim"), but will feature a few hardware upgrades, including a built-in microphone for Skype users, so you'll no longer need a separate headset. (Wait a second, is the PSP evolving into the rumored PlayStation Phone?!) It'll also feature an LCD screen with, according to the announcement, a "wider color gamut and higher contrast ratio" that'll offer more vibrant colors. The display should also be quicker, meaning less ghosting on graphic- or motion-intensive games. But our favorite part is that the screen will also include enhanced anti-reflection technology. Finally! We can go outside again! Now, we just have to do something about those pesky "friends" who try to drag us to places like "shopping malls" to "socialize."



The PSP-3000 will be included in the *Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters* bundle ($199.99 for a silver PSP-3000, a copy of the game, a UMD movie, a voucher for *Echochrome,* and a 1GB Memory Stick PRO Duo) or as a standalone system ($169.99).

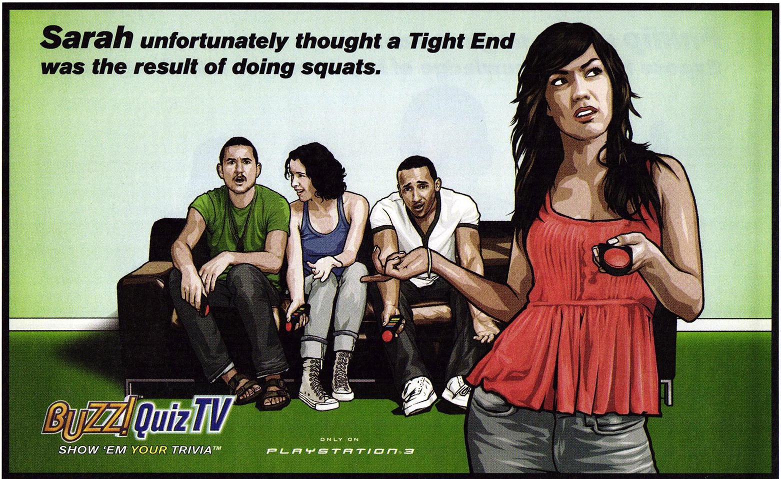
In preparation for Home, *LittleBigPlanet,* and a host of other text-heavy experiences, Sony is releasing a wireless keypad that will snap right onto your PS3 controller. It'll include shortcut buttons that instantly navigate to your Friends and Message Box menus, Bluetooth connectivity with any Bluetooth-enabled device that has keyboard functionality (like a smartphone, for example), and a mode that turns the main key area into a touch pad, like on a laptop, presumably for web browsing. Search for this baby in stores this November!

Kratos in Plaid



How did the PTOM staff react when they heard that Kratos, the friggin' *God of War,* would pick up a club and take to the greens as a downloadable character in *Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds* ($1.99 on PSN)?

ROB: That's stupid.
TERESA: But *funny*...
He's so cute! Just look at him!
ROB: Okay, *that's* funny.
It's like a Mini-Kratos.
TERESA: Yeah! I want a plush doll of him now.
GARY: What? A plush doll? I want one, too!



Sarah unfortunately thought a Tight End was the result of doing squats.
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EA "Announces" New Partners and Projects

In an announcement bordering on the absurd, EA revealed two new members in its EA Partners program…but refused to provide even a modicum of detail regarding the games they're working on. No name, no projected release date, nothing except a vague allusion to their genres. The "announcement" would be utterly devoid of informative value if not for the fact that the new partners, Japanese developer Grasshopper Manufacture and Epic Games' Polish development team People Can Fly, have the track record and reputations to create some truly innovative, quality games.

Grasshopper Manufacture is known for edgy, visually distinctive punk-style games like *BLOOD+ One Night Kiss, Samurai Champloo,* and *killer7.* Featuring the direct involvement of company director and noted artist SUDA51 and former Resident Evil creator/producer Shinji Mikami, GHM's new project is an action horror game that's promised to be "unique, stylish, and more mysterious" than current genre examples on the market. We did manage to confirm that the game will be devoid of zombies, with Mikami stating: "If I wanted to do more zombies, I could have done *Bio [Resident Evil] 5.*"

The People Can Fly development team was originally contracted to do work on Epic's *Gears of War 2.* Epic was so impressed by the team's contribution that it subsequently purchased the company. PCF's current project is (drum roll, please)…an action shooter. Epic Game's president Mike Capps states that they're not looking to reinvent the wheel, but intend to focus on creating a compelling world with polished gameplay that out-executes other genre competitors. Capps did indicate that development would begin on the PS3 version first to ensure that the PCF team has adequate time to learn the ins and outs of the system.

We'll relay further details as EA releases them, which should be in…[censored].

THE ANTIDOTE TO PS2 BLUES

Yakuza 2 might offer PS2-only gamers a solid hundred hours or so of criminally fun bliss (check out our review on p.84), but what to do after you finish Sega's PS2 swan song? Atlus has got you covered with two hot RPGs that'll surely keep you occupied while you save for that 160GB PS3 bundle…

ETERNAL POISON **November 11**

We preferred the original Japanese name *Poison Pink,* but either way, we're intrigued by this moody, broody strategy RPG that promises classic tactical action crossed with unconventional settings and storylines.

PERSONA 4 **December 9**

With stylish graphics, zippy music, trippy characters, and a distinctive battle system, *Persona 4* isn't just a boon for PS2 players; even next-gen JRPG fans owe it to themselves to check this one out.

Phillip faced a tough choice.
Expose his vast knowledge of boy bands, or lose the game.
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TOP10LIST

What we're playing, watching, reading, and consuming this month. And the reasons we don't have any surplus cash in our wallets.

Shane Meadows | Director | Netflix

You've probably never heard of him, but Shane Meadows is a British director who's delivered some of the most inventive, and powerful (small-scale) movies you may ever see. British director? Guess who's pick this is? Yeah, Rob got all English after watching Meadows' *This Is England* (a solid 8.5/10) and the stunning (in its language, brutality, style, and ultimate subtlety) *Dead Man's Shoes*. Both are available to watch online if you have a Netflix account. (Be warned, you may need a translation service to understand some references or language.)

Mary-Louise Parker | MILF | Yeah, right

Oh, Mary, where have you been for all of Gary's life? Your star turn in the Showtime series *Weeds* (which Gary is currently watching on DVD) has won the surly churl's heart, and now Gary is positively atwitter with giddy delight every time he thinks of the soon-to-be Mrs. Parker-Steinman. (Though we're pretty sure Ms. Parker would need a medicinal dose of her titular product before considering Gary's proposal.)

NBCOlympics.com | Online | Free

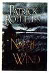
So the Olympics will be but a fading memory by the time you read this, but through NBC's fabulous online presentation of so many events, we're sure it will still be providing hours of entertainment to get you caught up with the latest kayaking action. Or Ken watching the soccer tournament not shown on TV. Or, in Rob's case, watching full field hockey matches of Great Britain's men's and women's teams. Yeah, he said field hockey. In public. Several times. We tried not to laugh.

Soulcalibur IV | Game | $59.99

Honor. It's a measly two syllable word with a massive impact, especially in regards to *Soulcalibur IV*. Teresa's new goal in life is to acquire every last Honor in *SC IV*—she's such a sucker for collectibles. She's also looking for more combatants to play against to acquire "honor" in the more traditional sense. "Will you guys play with me if I promise to stop parroting XiangHua's high-pitched 'just kidding!' every time I win?"

5 Gum - Rain flavor | Food | $1

So what's the big deal about gum? Well, for Roger it's the one thing that keeps him sane during his daily commute. Whether it's the @$$#*! going 20 mph below the limit in the fast lane or the $#!+ weaving in and out of every one-car-length space to chop a whole two seconds off his commute, Roger's teeth would be ground into bleeding nubs if not for the refreshing, long-lasting flavor of 5 Gum.



The Name of the Wind | Novel | $7.99

Forever on the hunt for epic fantasy that isn't just thinly veiled romance novels for boys, Gary stumbled onto Patrick Rothfuss' first installment in his *Kingkiller Chronicle* series. Like *Harry Potter* for grown-ups, *Wind* is a sprawling, ambitious, and intricately-detailed story of a boy who becomes a legendary, heroic figure.

Nike Air Max Torch 3 | Shoes | $78

The pad of Ken's foot has been swollen and damaged from overdoing it on the basketball court, and then riding his bike to work, and playing soccer. This shoe is like having your foot wrapped in marshmallows and duct tape. Of course, stopping all that crazy exercise stuff would also work as effectively and be precisely $78 cheaper than this option. Slob out, Ken, like the rest of us.

PAUL BARIBEAU

Paul Baribeau | Music | $5

When you're just one guy with a guitar, you've got to offer something truly special in order to get noticed. Paul Baribeau's latest exhibits some incredibly heartfelt songwriting that has Scott proclaiming it the best acoustic album of the past decade. Buy it—if you're still awake after reading this diatribe of musical insight.

iPod Touch 8GB | Gadget | $299

This new iPod is incredibly unnecessary and awesomely distracting. Download music, watch vids, check your email...and there's no superfluous phone attached! Ken hates phone interruptions, but finds his mid-deadline "where are the damn pages you lazy scumbags" outbursts soothed by his iPod's Touch.

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog | Short Film | $5

A supervillain musical? Scott was intrigued too. According to him, the plot is simple and the runtime is brief (45 minutes), but everything is just so well done that it actually manages to feel more fulfilling than your average full-length feature film. Download this on iTunes, now!

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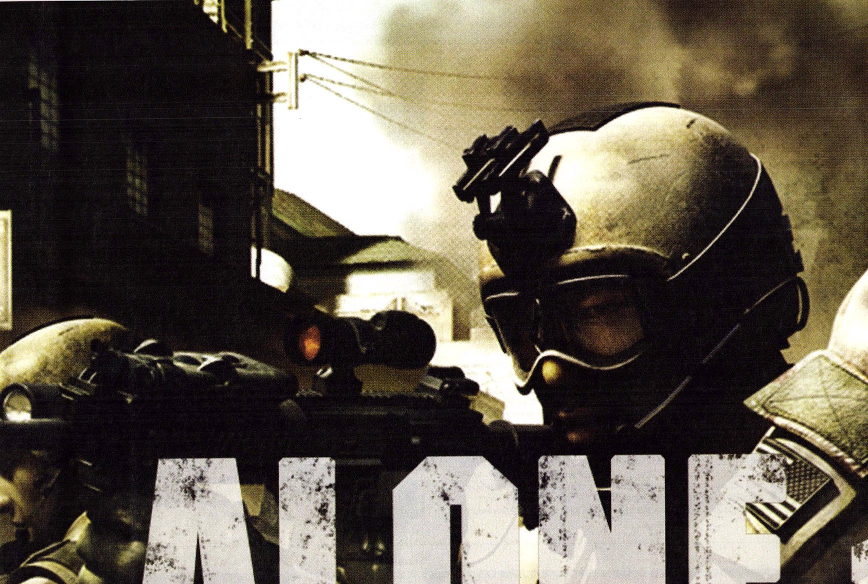

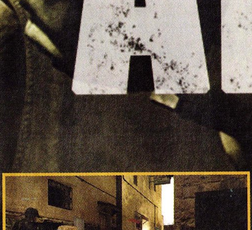

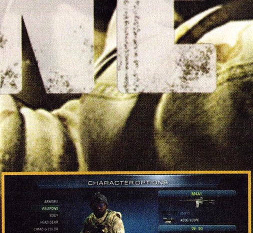
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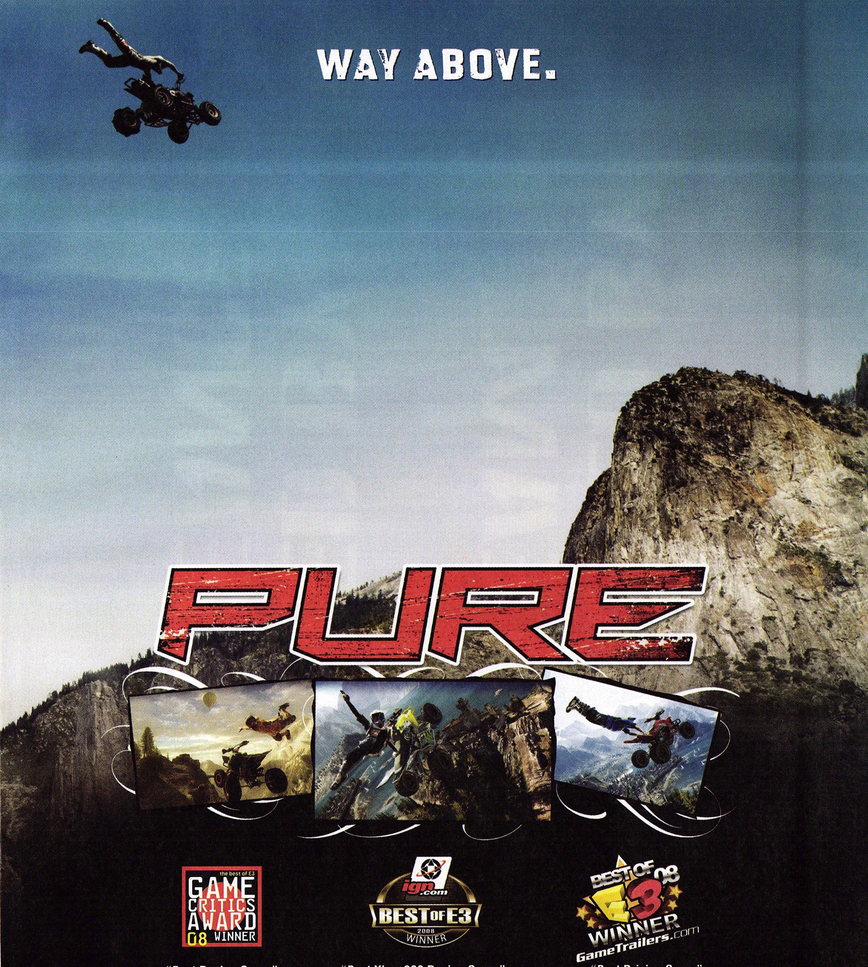
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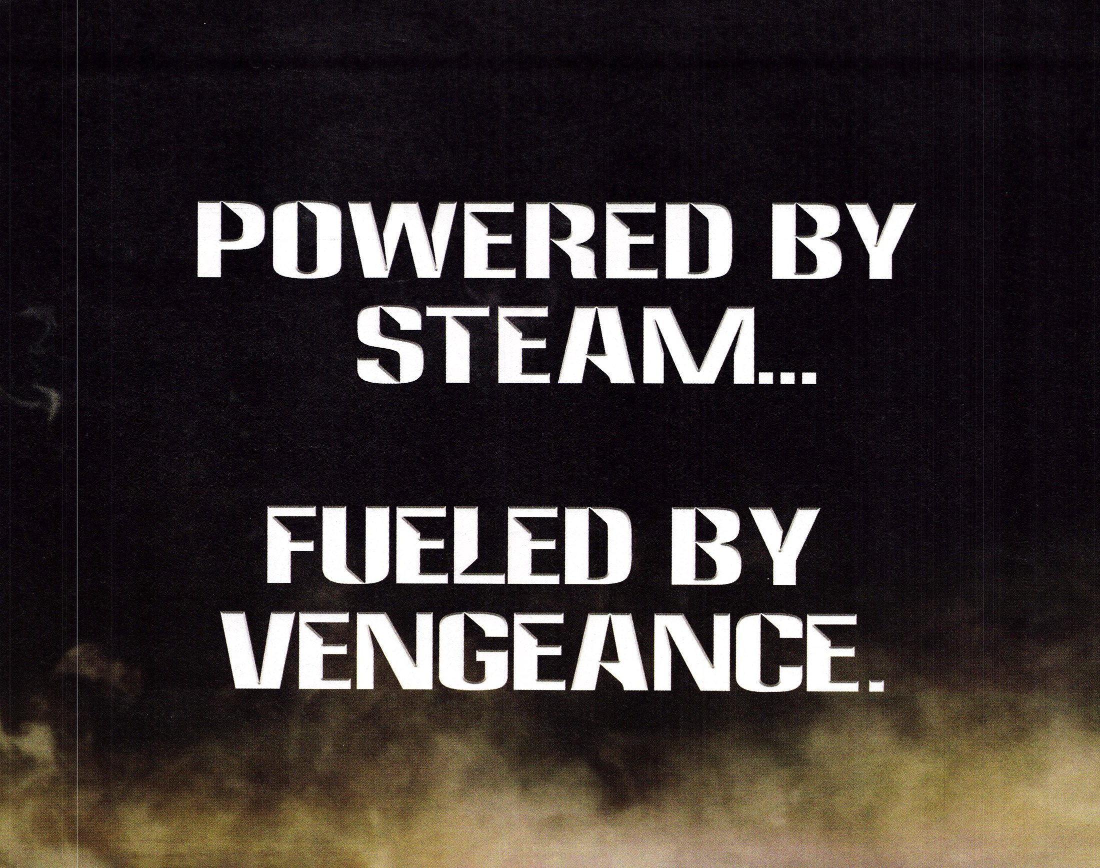

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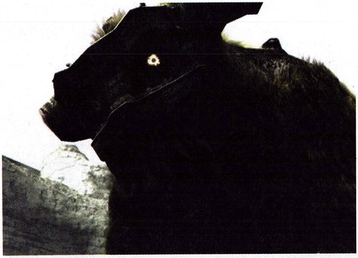
GamesRadar.com Top 7...

Bad guys you didn't want to kill

The gaming murders that left a bad taste in our mouths



The Colossi

Shadow of the Colossus

Most of these huge beasts are just minding their own business and only attack once provoked. Colossus 13 doesn't even retaliate, instead merely attempting to shake you off. They clearly feel pain too - stab them in the head and you'll know about it. Come on, one of them's even got a cool beard, yet you still killed it, didn't you? It's dead now. You did it. Shame on you.

Wanna read more?

- Stereotypical gamers we hate
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Head to:
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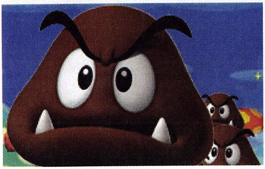


Goombas

Super Mario Bros.

If you stand still and they hit you, you die, but then that's true of buses and you don't go around stamping on them. You only get 100 points per kill too - the gaming equivalent of a $5.00 whole chicken. Has life really become so discounted?

GLaDOS

Portal

Just as hostages can come to bond with their captors, so you end up liking GLaDOS - the female-voiced computer in Portal, the Best Game Ever Made (TM). Guilt for killing her is prolonged because you have to do it a piece at a time. While she talks to you. (Sniff.)

Orbinaut

Sonic the Hedgehog

After these critters toss their spikes they're just cute, marshmallowy-looking creatures that just stare and slowly move forwards. They're now totally harmless. Are you really such a bastard that you'd kill them? Yep, us too. But we felt dirty afterwards.

Big Daddies

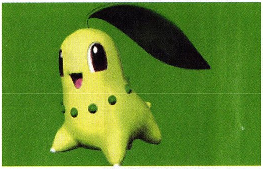
BioShock

They're huge, ugly, armed with a massive drill and turn violent with only the smallest provocation, but the Big Daddies still make us sad when they die. They're only protecting their Little Sister after all. 'Wake up, Mr Bubbles?' Sorry, ain't gonna happen.

Spotty Bulorb

Pikmin

This is the angry mob lynching of gaming, The Spotty Bulorb is surrounded in its sleep, worn down and then killed. While its children watch! Or maybe you killed them first? OK, so it's just like nature. But nature can be so cruel.



Level 1

Pokemon

You've been playing for ages and you run into a low-level Pokemon. That's when you realise your super-powered team of fighters has become a remorseless unit. What chance does a level 2 Pidgey have against your level 67 Glaceon?

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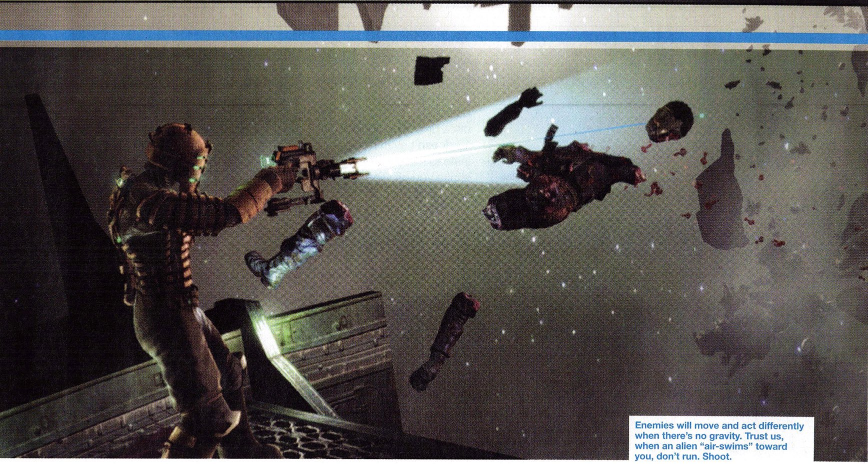


Enemies will move and act differently when there's no gravity. Trust us, when an alien "air-swims" toward you, don't run. Shoot.

PS3 | P

Dead Space

Survival horror reaches new heights

PS3 **GENRE:** Survival Horror **AVAILABLE:** October **PUBLISHER:** Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER:** EA Redwood Shores

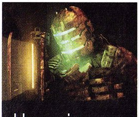
Scrawled on the metal walls of what was once the vibrant mining spacecraft *USG Ishimura* are the last words of dying men: "save me," "turn around," and "help," painstakingly inked with blood. Littered on the ground beneath those pleas are corpses lying in pools of blood. No, not corpses. Fleshy, skinless, sinewy pieces of tissue of what were once corpses. An arm here, half a head there, a lower torso with a pair of legs leaning upside-down against a broken door. Lights flicker behind whirling fans and open vents, throwing shadows across the dark rooms. Malfunctioning machines creak and clunk and screech; in the distance, moans, unearthly, hungry moans.

As I stomp past corridor after cramped, dimly lit corridor as Isaac Clarke, an engineer who responded to the *USG Ishimura's* distress call, I'm aware that only a thin sheet of metal separates me from black, lifeless space…and only a protective body suit, an assortment of mining tools, and my own wits separates me from suffering the same fate as the former, now mostly dismembered crew of the *Ishimura*.

I shudder. Something *bad* happened on the *USG Ishimura*, and I have the unlucky job of navigating Isaac Clarke through the middle of it.

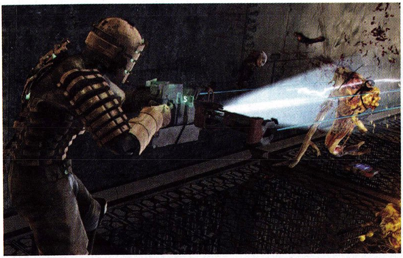
Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes

If you plan on playing *Dead Space*, do yourself a favor: Forget everything you know about anatomy. In EA's new third-person survival horror IP, you'll need to learn a whole new set of rules. Rule one, never go for the headshot. Rule two, never assume a "dead" corpse is dead, because whatever vileness has invaded the *Ishimura* is wickedly clever (not to mention resilient) and has a sadistic penchant for playing mind games.

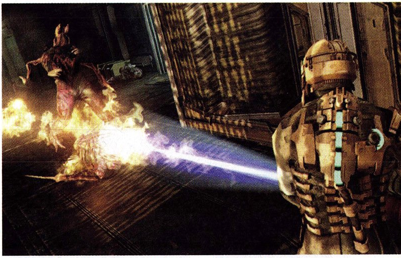


Hey, nice shades

If you pre-order the game at GameStop, GameCrazy, or Best Buy, you'll receive a hardcover postcard-sized art book that includes 10 pages of 3D art and a pair of those red-and-blue 3D glasses you probably wore when you were a kid. It contains around a hundred pages of character models, early concepts, and developer commentary. Our favorite part? It's small enough that you can tuck it away in a corner when you're done skimming through it!



Upgrade weapons and armor using workbenches scattered around the levels. Then, sit back and enjoy the blood. Mmm, blood 'n' guts, our favorite breakfast.



Though strategic dismemberment is *Dead Space's* specialty, roasting enemies with a flamethrower works almost as well.

In one part of my hands-on demo, I was traveling to the morgue on one of many repair errands and had to pass through the *Ishimura's* science and medical deck. In a dark corridor, I saw two human corpses on the floor. Hmm, I thought to myself. How did they get there? I didn't kill them…Remembering Rob's previous experience (where the game's producer pulled a prank by leading him past a monster that was only pretending to be dead), I decided to shoot the bodies. Sure enough, an alien hiding beneath the bodies leapt to attention. As it lumbered toward me, I directed my plasma cutter at the creature's head. No effect. (In some fights, heads roll off and still the monsters don't even stumble.) Next, I shot at the legs of the roughly bipedal creature. After two clean shots, the left leg detached. The monster dropped to the floor. Whew, I thought to myself, I've immobilized him.

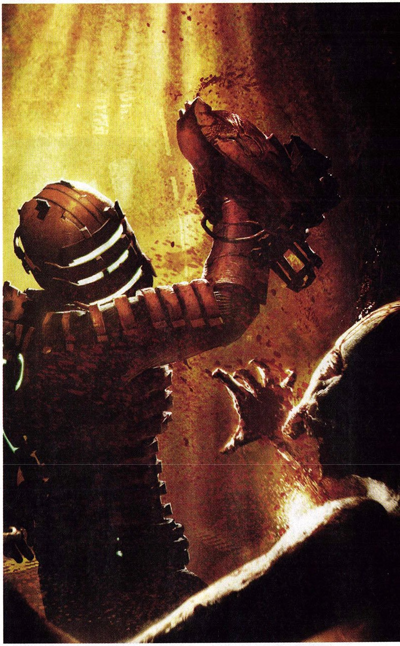
Wrong. A moment later, the monster used its *arms* and started crawling toward me, moving even faster than when it had legs. Half-panicking now, I instinctively activated my Stasis power, which slows whatever I'm aiming at. The creature glowed blue and lurched in slow motion, affording me time to plan my next move. Instead of slicing off its arms with my ripper (an industrial strength chainsaw used in mining operations) or immolating it with my flamethrower, I decided to use my other power, Kinesis (short for telekinesis), to lift the monster's detached leg and fling it at him. A few smacks later, time was flowing normally again and the creature was dead on the floor. Or maybe "dead" on the floor? I shot it a few times just to be sure. No reaction. Good. I collected the ammo that dropped from its body and moved on, thinking that I had this game in the bag.

Wrong again. Next I entered a room where infants in tanks lined the walls. Just what was going on in the *USG Ishimura*, I wondered. Experiments on infants? But before I could explore, I heard a shriek, and a malformed, tentacled baby burst out of one of the vents and started clawing at my head, its "arms" wrapping around my neck. I spammed the X button and triggered an animation: Isaac tore the monster from his neck, slammed it to the ground, and stomped it with his boot into a bloody pulp. Great, I killed a baby. But now I knew I had to shoot "dead" bodies *and* every air vent in order to avoid surprises. Never a safe moment.

Dead Weight

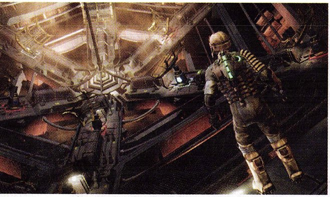
After stepping past the dead child, I found a text document in the floor. It listed the names of all the babies born in recent weeks. That's how *Dead Space's* story is told—through video, audio, and text recordings scattered throughout the ship. Outside Isaac's basic story of arriving on the *USG Ishimura* and the fact that he himself was unable to leave because his own vehicle had mysteriously exploded, you can unravel the *Ishimura's* cryptic plot through clues in the environment.

And the further I explored *Dead Space*, the creepier the *Ishimura's* story became. Tales of sane men pulling out their own teeth, scenes of

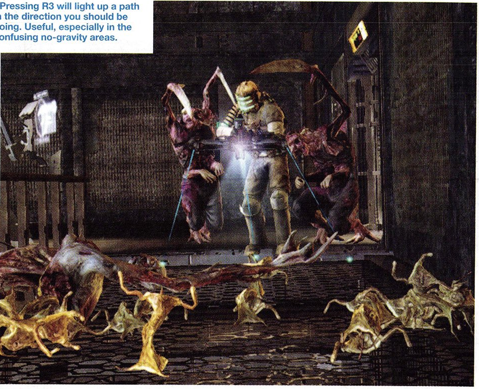


Warren Ellis penned part of the game's backstory and structure. A six-issue comic and animated DVD tell the rest of *Dead Space's* tragic tale.

Pro Tip: Don't preview horror games in the office. Everyone turns, stares, and then giggles with pointed fingers when they hear you yelp "Mommy!" because something scared you. How mean!



«Pressing R3 will light up a path in the direction you should be going. Useful, especially in the confusing no-gravity areas.



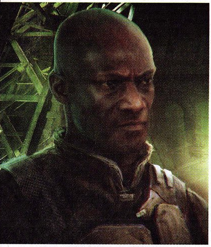
The little ones are much, much scarier (and tougher to kill) than the big ones! There's just too many of them.

"Did you hear that?"

You can't trust your senses aboard the *USG Ishimura*. Not your eyes, since shadows make it hard to see, and not your ears either. Definitely not your ears. We all know that bad guys scream, moan, shriek, or howl. We all know that footsteps and random taps are indicative of enemies nearby. We all know the difference between "you're in danger!" music and "whew, you're safe" music. But what happens when the sound of enemy footsteps is all but identical to the sound your own character creates when he accidentally sends random corpse limbs rolling as he walks past them? (The limbs make a popping noise, too, if you step on them directly...disgusting.) What happens when the music randomly flares into a cacophony of noise, but you search for ten minutes only to discover there actually aren't any hidden enemies? What happens when you can't tell the difference between "normal spaceship" noise and "a bad guy is coming toward you" noise?

I'll tell you what happens: you get damn paranoid. *Dead Space's* soundtrack was crafted to enhance your fright-filled experience, creating terror even when all your other senses indicate that you're safe. Worse is when there's a lack of noise, creating an illusion of safety when there's really something lurking just around the corner...Yikes!

PS3 | P



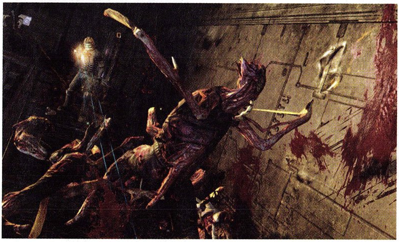
Two other Concordance Extraction Corp. employees are working with Isaac.

suicides and murders, and rumors of dementia and hallucination haunted the documents I found...and then Isaac himself started to see things that weren't there. Whatever it was that had caused the madness was still nearby...

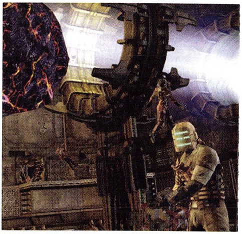
As I led Isaac further across the ship, performing the repairs necessary to get the vehicle functioning again so he can return to civilization, I didn't just encounter hostile enemies—the ship itself seemed to be against me. Every little thing needed fixing (forcing me to use Isaac's Stasis and Kinesis powers to get them working again), and walls would occasionally crumble before my very eyes (requiring me to utilize the oxygen tanks or gravity boots in Isaac's suit). Combined, these elements could create some intriguing environmental puzzles. One fact is certain, though: Getting Isaac off the *Ishimura* will be fraught with panic-inducing difficulties, since those puzzles will likely involve both a countdown timer (you only have limited oxygen, after all) and enemies attacking in zero-g.

Soon enough, we'll be back on board the *Ishimura* to play through the game in its entirety. We'll let you know then whether *Dead Space* offers an experience that's delightfully frightening or frighteningly undelightful—though if our early tests are any indication, we're in for a helluva gruesome scare.

Teresa Dun



Aiming your Plasma Cutter at this alien's knee is equivalent to a headshot.



You'll need to use Kinesis to maneuver heavy machinery into place.

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With the added ability to remove your feet from the board comes an entire library of potential new tricks, both old school and modern.

PS3 | P

Skate 2

Hands-On Preview

Now with 100-percent more walking!

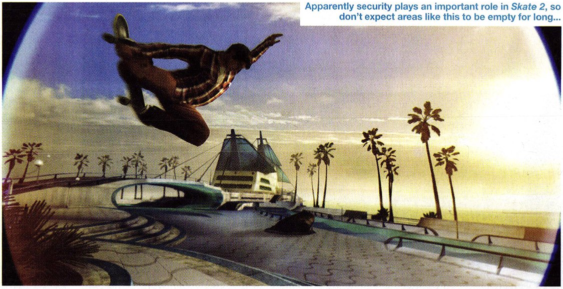
PS3 **AVAILABLE:** 2009 **GENRE:** Action Sports **PUBLISHER:** EA **DEVELOPER:** EA Black Box

You now place wagers and take any number of paths in Death Races.

About this time last year, in the midst of my stint as a lowly intern, an early copy of *Skate* appeared on my boss's desk. Knowing it would soon be handed-off to someone who wasn't me, I decided to stay late and get in a kickflip or two while I still had the chance. And suddenly it was midnight. The skateboard leaning against my bedroom wall (neglected, but not forgotten) was surely part of what kept me playing, but mostly it was the realistic world and addictive "flick it" control system—which mapped flip tricks to the right analog stick and imbued the genre with new potential for creativity and skill. I was hooked, but I also saw room for improvement. Fortunately, so did EA Black Box, and they have the sequel to prove it.

Probably the most impressive new feature on display is the arsenal of new moves and abilities. The team has doubled (yes, doubled) the number of tricks through a simple evolution of the existing controls—like flicking the right analog stick while holding a grab to perform fingerflips or board varials, for example. The extensive list of new tricks includes airwalks, judos, inverts, hippy jumps, bonelesses, fastplants, inverts, and many more, with nearly all utilizing simple, logical button combinations that feel natural and don't interfere with the core mechanics established in the last game.

The tricks, however, are overshadowed by the newly added opportunity to step off your board and walk around. To those who didn't play the original *Skate*, this may not sound like a big deal, but veterans know that nothing says "disappointment" quite like a staircase you can't just walk up. Tapping the triangle button unshackles you from your deck, at which point you can grab and move various objects in the environment. Though the off-the-board controls were still a work-in-progress in my hands-on time, rearranging basic skatepark obstacles like rails and



Apparently security plays an important role in *Skate 2*, so don't expect areas like this to be empty for long...

quarter pipes was effortless and entertaining.

Skate 2 also features a brand new contextual scoring system, though the team offered few details on exactly how it works; essentially, the amount of points you receive for a trick is directly impacted by the context in which that trick is performed. For example, a kickflip on flat ground wouldn't be worth as much as a kickflip executed while soaring over a massive stair set. Think of it as a more dynamic version of *Tony Hawk's* "gaps."

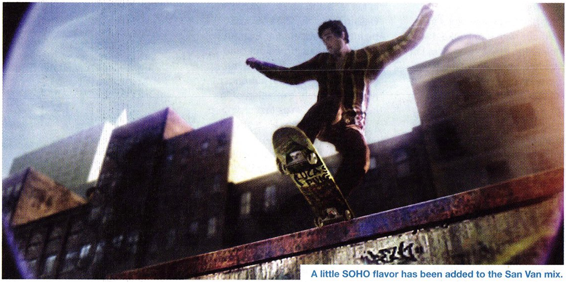
The story and city have also been reinvented for the sequel. Soon after becoming the biggest name in skateboarding in the first *Skate*, you disappear. Five years pass and in that time a series of miraculously non-lethal disasters destroy San Vanelona; by the time you return, the city has been reborn as New San Vanelona thanks to the efforts (and capital) of a faceless mega-corporation. These are the only plot details divulged thus far, but the team promises that the story is deeper and more emotionally driven this time around, and that the X-Games have been replaced by "something that isn't limited by the X-Games license," according to producer Jay Balmer.

Details about New San Vanelona were equally sparse, but I did explore three new areas: San Van Mountain, the Waterfront, and Slappy's Skatepark. The mountain area—which was clearly built with death races in mind—is teeming with pine trees and rustic lodges, and features a drainage ditch half-pipe and a crazy downhill section complete with shortcuts, branching paths, and speed banks. The Waterfront resembles a fancy beach resort sans the sand and sports a hefty collection of benches, ledges, and rolling concrete—as well as a few killer stair sets. (It also bleeds into a downtown area full of huge obstacles.) Slappy's Skatepark dons a junkyard aesthetic, dotted with weathered metal and concrete, lots of jumbo quarter pipes and vert ramps, and some nice kickers to rails.

Each area felt unique and unlike any section from the previous game, but at the same time they shared some clear similarities. All three felt just a little less natural than the original San Vanelona—which could have passed for a real-life city—and on the whole they seemed somewhat empty, though we expect to see a more fleshed-out environment by the time the game ships. Also, the color scheme appears brighter than the first game, with the camera set higher and farther away from the skater now. The combined result is a notably different look and feel (though, again, this was an early build and the impact of these tweaks could change).

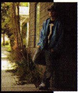
Many other features are being improved but not overhauled. The video editor will be able to record longer stretches of play, character creation should be deeper (female characters!), and the session marker system won't be so prone to long load times. Oh yeah, and there'll be Trophies. No word yet on when this bad boy hits store shelves, but take that as a good sign; it means Black Box isn't rushing.

Scott Butterworth



A little SOHO flavor has been added to the San Van mix.

Pro's Choice



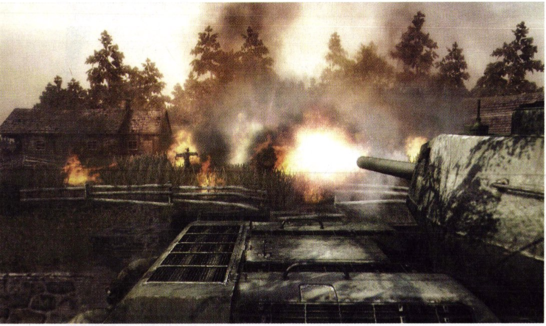
We asked professional skater Rob Dyrdek about his involvement in *Skate 2*. Here's what he had to say:

PTOM: How did you become involved in this game, and why did you choose to help out in the development process?

Rob Dyrdek: I think when they went to develop this game, they chose a very eclectic group of skateboarders whereas the original *Tony Hawk* game had this elite echelon, you know? The difference with this game is it shows someone from every facet of skating, and when they asked me to be involved, I was like, "Of course! I'm into it!" I know EA's history and just videogames period, but it wasn't until I really got up there and played it for the first time and really understood, "Wow this is like real skateboarding." But for me it's an honor because what I'm about is showing what real skateboarding is to the mainstream and this is real skateboarding at its finest.

What do you hope people will take away from these games?

RB: More than anything, to me it's educational. If you finish this game, you are educated on how the sport is and what it means: to get a photo in a magazine, film for footage to come up, and get shop sponsors and eventually get a board sponsor and other sponsors, to turn pro. You understand the process that it is, and that to me it's helping educate the mainstream—those that don't skate—about the sport. I think that's huge and is one of the biggest things for me. I love it so much.



Tanks in Japan, revenge in Berlin. *World at War* may be a return to WWII, but this won't be quite like any other *Call of Duty* game before it.

Call of Duty: World at War

Hands-On Preview

Back from the future

PS3 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Action PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Treyarch

PS3 | P

"Private Miller!" my commanding officer (voiced by Kiefer Sutherland) yells in my direction. "Get a grenade up there!" We've just been ambushed after unwittingly triggering a booby trap while examining a recently downed plane. Soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army, clad head-to-toe in brush, rush straight at us in incessant waves from the impressively dense vegetation. Bullets rip through bodies and blood erupts from the exit wounds as the air grows thick with the shrieking death knells of a dozen new corpses. Clearly, Treyarch has embraced a Mature rating.

With the ambush behind us, what's left of my squad presses on. I'm told this core group will surround me for most of the game, my CO included. But at this point, all I can think about is the flamethrower that's now in my hands. Though it slows my pace considerably and overheats frustratingly fast, a tank full of liquid death is a sadistic joy to wield. It literally incinerates all before me, not discriminating between foliage and flesh. Lucky for me, my allies and I have been made reasonably fire resistant. The Japanese snipers in palm trees, soldiers in tall grass, and gunners in bunkers, however, aren't nearly so fortunate.

After blasting a few tanks at close range with a bazooka, I complete the mission, and I'm left feeling fully satisfied by the epic proportions and adrenaline-pumping chaos of *World at War's* action (all of which looks pretty amazing, as it should since it's powered by the *Call of Duty 4* engine). And despite the new enemy, tactics, and weaponry, it still feels like a *Call of Duty* game, complete with run-and-gun combat and dramatic Hollywood moments.

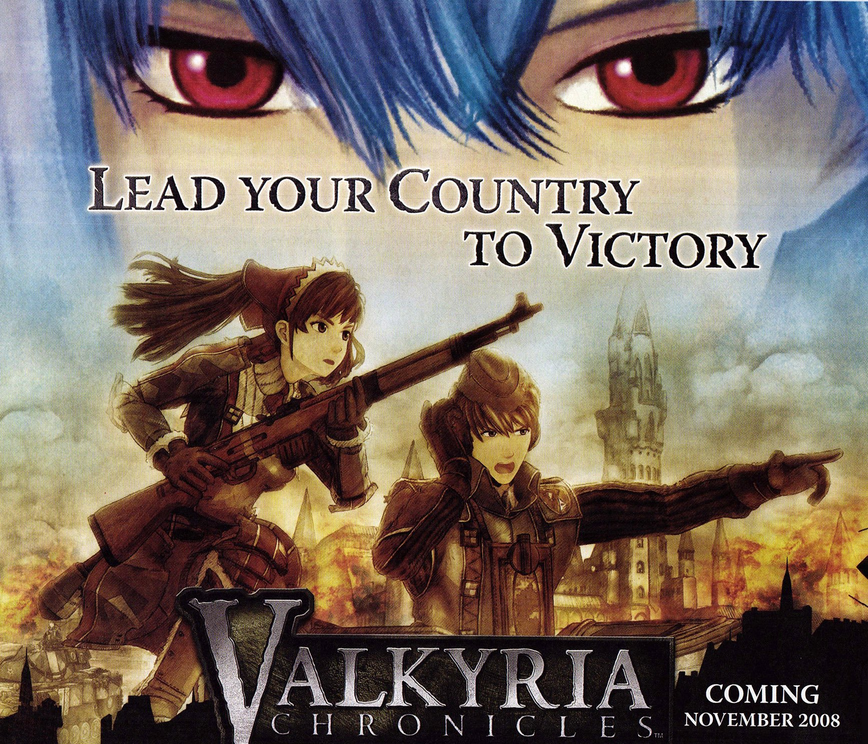
But I still have another mission ahead of me, this time as Russian Private Petrenko hunting Nazis in a bombed-out (but beautifully detailed) building in the heart of Berlin. Armed with a double-barrel shotgun and some Molotov cocktails, my squad stalks through the charred structure, torching German soldiers without mercy or discretion. One Nazi, with his final breath, attempts to pull the pin of a grenade; I put a gun in his face and pull the trigger. Calling the tone "dark" would be an understatement. Eventually, the fighting pours out onto the rain-slick streets where the mission ends with the surrender and subsequent execution of the last remaining Nazis (according to the developers, there's a strong "revenge" motif).

Some of you may be upset that the series is returning to WWII, but I can assure you that, while your apprehension is somewhat understandable, it's also undeserved. *World at War* is good. Now we just have to wait and see *how* good. Oh, and yes, it will support Trophies. Scott Butterworth

Brothers In Arms

Multiplayer options in *World at War* are expected to be extensive. Play the main campaign with two to four friends online or two-player split-screen in either normal or competitive co-op—the latter of which requires you to earn points by racking up kills, reviving teammates, avoiding death, and so on. Either way, difficulty will adjust dynamically depending on the number of players, and you'll earn XP that will carry over into competitive multiplayer, which is based heavily on *COD 4's* model of leveling up and earning perks. Also, expect a few vehicle-based missions and modes in both areas of play. Can you say "fire tanks"?

According to the developers, the musical score will be more industrial than orchestral this time around in an effort to create a darker atmosphere.



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Payback is *eine zicke.* One woman, a handful of available weapons—and a whole bunch of dead Nazis.

In the best stealth-action tradition, Violette can quietly neutralize foes and drag their bodies out of sight.

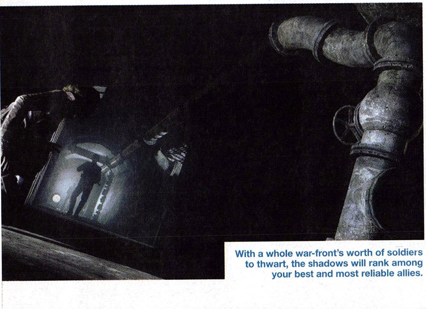
Velvet Assassin

Dramatic license to kill

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** Holiday **GENRE:** Stealth Action **PUBLISHER:** Gamecock Media Group
DEVELOPER: Replay Studios

PS3 | P

Previously given the serviceable-but-far-less-evocative working title *Sabotage* (until EA unveiled its similarly-themed *Saboteur),* this stealth-action game is heavily inspired by the real-life exploits of the WWII secret agent Violette Szabo. You take the role of "Violette Summer" conducting one-woman secret ops behind enemy lines against Nazi Germany. The goal of developer Replay Studios—*und ja, es ist eine deutsche Firma*—was to pay unflinching attention to historical detail (and homage to the real-life Szabo), and still provide an engaging, stealth-combat game experience.



With a whole war-front's worth of soldiers to thwart, the shadows will rank among your best and most reliable allies.

Replay Studios has taken some dramatic license, literally and figuratively "sexing up" their heroine somewhat in the finest Lara Croft-ian tradition. While Szabo, alas, wound up in the women's concentration camp, Ravensbruck, after her second and final mission, Violette Summer's story plays out quite differently. In fact, the entire game is framed as the memories of our heroine (from her postwar hospital bed), comatose for the moment, but very much alive and ultimately triumphant—if you can pull off her missions.

A purplish (violet?) shimmer outlining her body indicates when she's cloaked in shadow, or otherwise hidden from view. She can take out her enemies with silenced Lugers, slit their throats from behind, drag their carcasses out of sight and search their bodies for weapons or other items. One particularly nasty kill-technique allows you to pull the pin discreetly from a grenade on a guard's belt, skulk away, and wait for him to die for *der Vaterland.*

In the best stealth-action tradition, Violette is no uber-powered videogame vixen—she needs to hit her enemies quickly, hard, and dirty, when they ain't lookin', or the guards alerted to her presence will light her up in seconds.

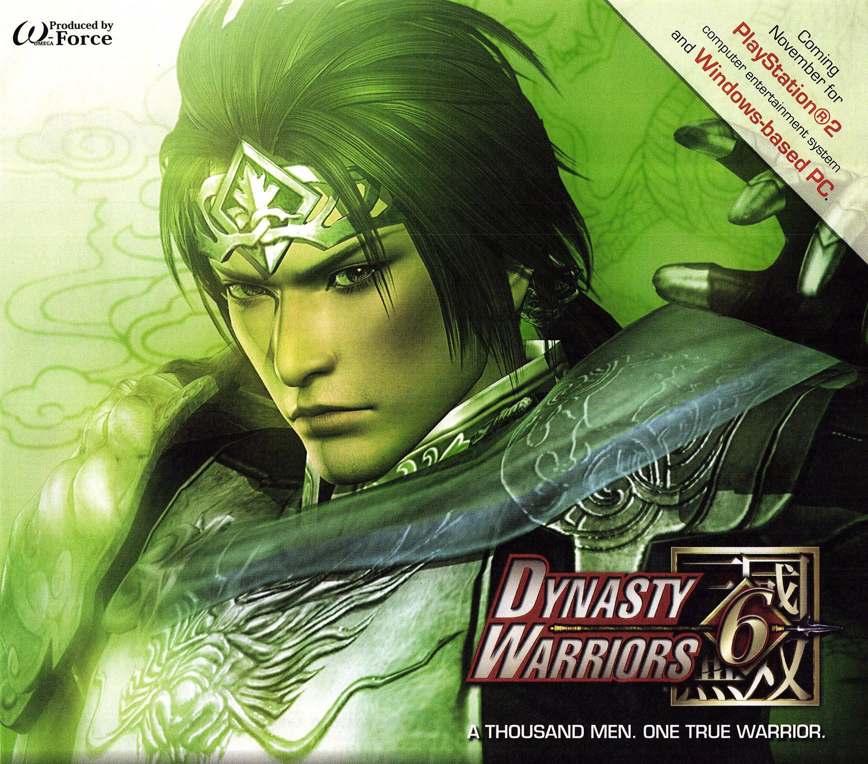
One great mechanic is what you might call "Morphine Time": The idea is that, whenever Violette's troubled memories especially upset her—remember, she's lying unconscious in a hospital bed—the nurses shoot her up with morphine to calm her down. In gameplay terms, this translates to Violette injecting herself at critical moments (trippy effects ensue and Violette is suddenly, temporarily seen dressed in her hospital nightie, a nice dreamlike touch), for a "Bullet-Time"-like slowdown during which she can one-hit-kill her enemies.

One of the uncompromisingly cool aspects of *Velvet Assassin's* most recent build is that none of the (still-touchy) horrors of World War II seem to have been sugar-coated for the sake of a rating. In an industry where showing a swastika is a no-no, here we have levels faithfully representing the Warsaw Ghetto—its streets strewn with furniture dumped out the windows of ransacked apartments. Here we have our heroine Violette, delivering cyanide to a doomed Allied prisoner—you know, the kind of stuff a secret agent does, and did. Soldier on, Replay Studios.

Chris Hudak

Violette Reine Elizabeth Bushell Szabo (1921 – 1945)—"My husband has been killed by the Germans and I'm going to get my own back." http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SDEszabo.htm

Produced by ω-Force



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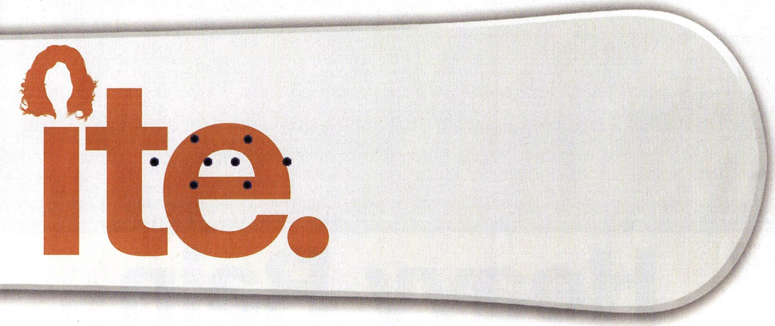
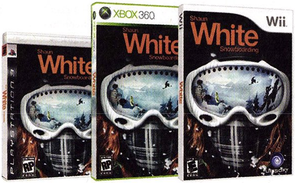
GAME OF E3 2008

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We've seen this in action and can confirm it really looks this sweet!

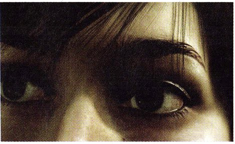
Heavy Rain

First Look Preview

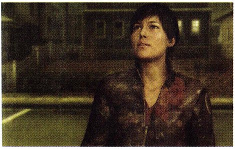
PS3 | P

For style and originality, meet the coolest game on PS3

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** Late 2009 **GENRE:** Adventure **PUBLISHER:** SCEA **DEVELOPER:** Quantic Dream



If you look close enough, the level of detail is simply incredible.



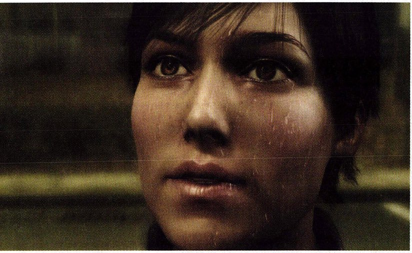
Investigative journalists dress more sytlishly than game hacks.

In September 2005, a French development house named Quantic Dream, previously known for roping David Bowie into a story-driven futuristic action adventure called *Omikron: The Nomad Soul,* released the unique action thriller *Indigo Prophecy.* Like *Omikron* before it, *Indigo Prophecy* earned a cult following for its intriguing gameplay style and focus on pushing a story through a player's actions. In these two games, the studio established a dedication to creative story-telling that wasn't afraid to touch on mature themes. What the team would do next, after aborted attempts at an *Omikron* sequel, was keenly anticipated.

In 2006 Quantic Dream released the first *Heavy Rain* trailer (or tech test) entitled "The Casting"...and then went silent. Recently at Games Convention in Leipzig, Germany, we got a glimpse into what to expect. And there's a reason why Sony chose to headline its GC press conference with *Heavy Rain:* It could turn out to be one of the most groundbreaking titles to be released on any platform, and it's exclusive to the PlayStation 3.

Quantic Dream CEO and *Heavy Rain* writer and director David Cage explained the team's lofty goals. *Heavy Rain* is story-driven, but you don't watch the story—you decide how the story is told by your actions. The aim and intent is to immerse you emotionally, and to cultivate a deep connection with the characters. *Heavy Rain's* story will explore themes that no other game has attempted. Finally, the team is shooting to have all this potentially complex dynamic gameplay accessible to a wide audience. Sound like a tall order? That's nothing, brother!

The demo we saw was designed to illustrate the concept of bending stories. Like a rubber band, the story will have specific plot points that'll always happen, but decisions you make could stretch or deform the tale in numerous directions. In the first section of the demo, we see a dedicated female journalist named Madison arriving at a suspected killer's house. Leland White, a taxidermist, may be involved in a missing-woman incident, and Madison is following a lead that could name



Again, these aren't cutscenes, this level of detail is inherent in the gameplay; the raindrops actually roll down her cheeks!

him the prime suspect. Upon her arrival, she realizes he's not at home, so she slips through a window to investigate further.

Expanding on the MPAR (Motion Physical Action Reaction) system from *Indigo Prophecy, Heavy Rain's* controls are extremely unique. Instead of using the left analog stick to move forward, you press L1 like a gas pedal. To change direction, you use the left stick to turn your head, and your body will follow. To perform actions such as opening a door, you might have to push the right analog stick forward. The conversation system is mapped to the DualShock 3's Sixaxis, so tilting the controller in a certain direction will cause you to emit a vocal response to the situation. For physical elements, such as when Madison is lifting the window to slip through, or pushing barrels together to form a ladder, you will raise or push the PS3 controller. The combination of inputs allows you to converse, move, and act all at the same time.

Madison scopes out the house to find a woman's shoe, torn women's clothing, and blood stains on the garage floor. While blood stains at the home of a taxidermist could be explained, the clothing is rather odd. As Madison goes upstairs, the scene takes a disgusting and shocking turn. Not only does she discover a woman's body chopped up in a bathtub, but the reason why. Leland has created stuffed human dolls, and has dressed them up in compromising positions. Madison flips out, and realizes that it's time to find an exit—and quickly. Just as she gets her wits in check, Leland returns home. In a similar fashion to *Indigo Prophecy* or the television show *24,* the action goes split-screen. You watch in the left portion as Leland goes to the fridge and grabs a beer, and relaxes on the couch and flips on the TV. On the right side of the screen, Madison (under your control) quietly sneaks downstairs, slips out under the garage door, and escapes safely. Phew!

How you move and react to getting caught by the likely killer, taxidermist Leland White, will directly impact the outcome of the entire game.

What would happen if Madison screws up and Leland finds her? Cage explains that this scene can have a ridiculous amount of outcomes. Madison can be rescued by the police, or even find some way to kill Leland. Leland can even kill Madison, and the game will take into consideration that she's dead, then continue the storyline without her.

On top of the already impressive story and control scheme, Quantic's deft manipulation of a taut, consequential atmosphere is just brilliant. Using highly motion-captured actors that are recreated impeccably—right down to subtle movements in the actor's eyes—these hyper realistic models look phenomenal. Even the simple piano music soundtrack subtly adds dramatic tension.

It's clear that *Heavy Rain* is a monumental undertaking in its virtual rewriting of the gameplay mechanics we've become used to over the years. The kicker? This scene with Madison is apparently not the actual game itself, but a detailed test case proof of concept, illustrating the style and scope being attempted, but not giving away a shred of detail about the actual *Heavy Rain* story. We'll have to wait, in eager anticipation, to finally experience what could signify the true next-generation of game design.

Billy Berghammer

In their own words

We sit down with Quantic Dream's CEO, Writer/Director DAVID CAGE and Co-CEO, Executive Producer GUILLAUME DE FONDAUMIÈRE

You said that you were trying to make this game really accessible. Yet, you're breaking away from so many traditional game conventions. Are you planning on having a detailed training level like in *Indigo Prophecy?*
CAGE: There will be some sort of initiation for the player to discover all of these things, so you won't be put in the house of the taxidermist from the beginning. You will have time to discover and get used to all of these things. But the interface is so simple and intuitive that you really learn it in a couple of minutes and quickly forget about it—which is always a good sign.

So you said you can fight, or escape, or even die. The whole story would change, wouldn't it?
CAGE: There are different actions. Some actions would have consequences from within the same scene. But other actions would have consequences on other scenes, and on the whole story. For example, if you die in this scene, it would pretty much affect the whole story. It's not game over. I insist on this point; it's not as if you die, you fail. The game will continue…

With a different character?
CAGE: I can't tell you. Each scene is non-linear, as you can see from this example. But also the full story arc is non-linear, which means it will not only lead to different endings, but it will lead to different stories.

How long will one play-through take?
CAGE: We're just in the middle of production right now, so I don't have precise information for you on this. We plan to have 8–12 hours of gameplay for one play-through if you play straight. I'm sure that some players will want to play several times to see all of the options.

Who's doing the music, and are there plans to work with *Indigo Prophecy* composer Angelo Badalamenti again?
CAGE: No, we really enjoyed the collaboration. I was really fortunate in my games because we had music from David Bowie in my first game *[Omikron]*, then Angelo Badalamenti second, so who's next?! We want to explore different sound worlds and have different types of emotions from the music, so probably it will be a big Hollywood name that fits the mood of what we're doing.

How long has the game been in development?
FONDAUMIÈRE: We started in September 2006. We had a base story, but really started from scratch and on the engine three years ago. But we had the real kickoff in September 2006.

How far in development would you say you are right now?
FONDAUMIÈRE: We're in full production. The technology is done now. It's tough to say. The better question would be the scene we showed, how far is it from being finished? I'd say it's approximately 85-percent finished. This is something we delivered to Sony in December. This was really the test scene for all of us to start testing the interface. But other scenes are really coming along, are better graphically. I can't tell you more, but there are scenes that are very, very different in terms of numbers of characters on the set.

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Crude Humor
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Language
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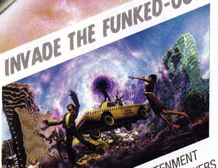
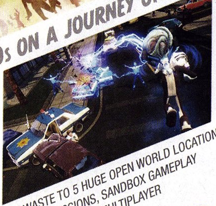
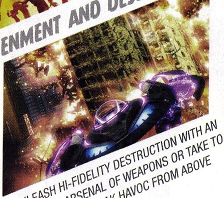
INVADE THE FUNKED-OUT '70s ON A JOURNEY OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND DESTRUCTION



EMBARK ON THE PATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT TO LEARN DEVASTATING NEW MENTAL POWERS FROM AN ANCIENT ALIEN KUNG-FU MASTER



LAY WASTE TO 5 HUGE OPEN WORLD LOCATIONS THROUGH MISSIONS, SANDBOX GAMEPLAY AND ALIEN VS. ALIEN MULTIPLAYER



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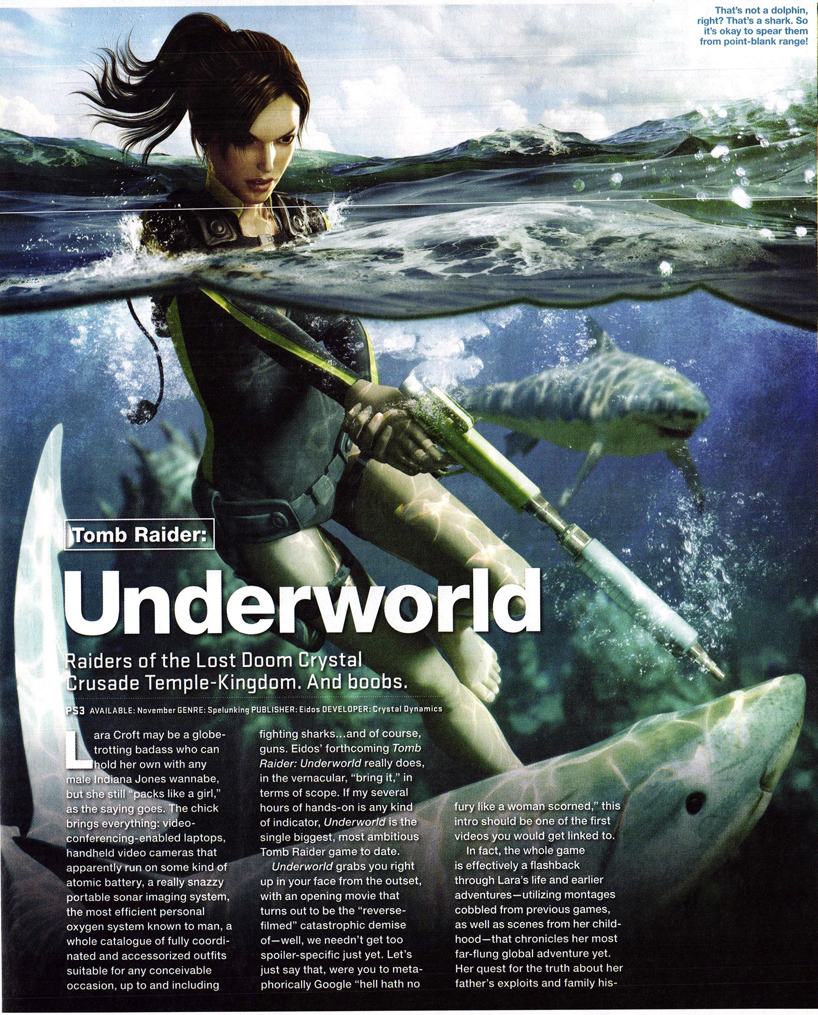


That's not a dolphin, right? That's a shark. So it's okay to spear them from point-blank range!

Tomb Raider: Underworld

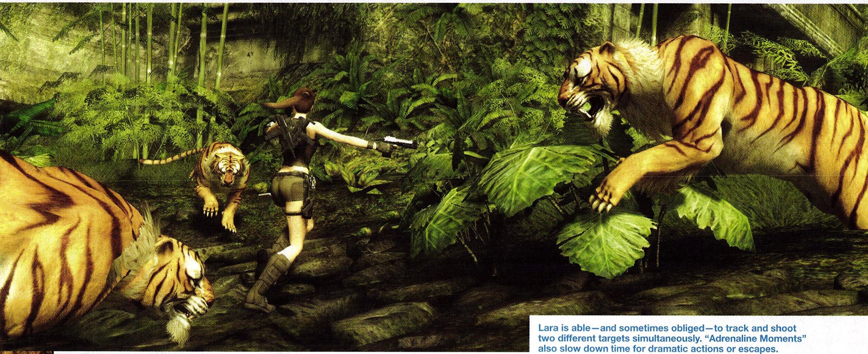
Raiders of the Lost Doom Crystal Crusade Temple-Kingdom. And boobs.

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** November **GENRE:** Spelunking **PUBLISHER:** Eidos **DEVELOPER:** Crystal Dynamics

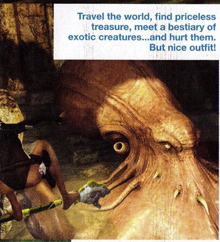
Lara Croft may be a globe-trotting badass who can hold her own with any male Indiana Jones wannabe, but she still "packs like a girl," as the saying goes. The chick brings everything: video-conferencing-enabled laptops, handheld video cameras that apparently run on some kind of atomic battery, a really snazzy portable sonar imaging system, the most efficient personal oxygen system known to man, a whole catalogue of fully coordinated and accessorized outfits suitable for any conceivable occasion, up to and including fighting sharks...and of course, guns. Eidos' forthcoming *Tomb Raider: Underworld* really does, in the vernacular, "bring it," in terms of scope. If my several hours of hands-on is any kind of indicator, *Underworld* is the single biggest, most ambitious Tomb Raider game to date.

Underworld grabs you right up in your face from the outset, with an opening movie that turns out to be the "reverse-filmed" catastrophic demise of—well, we needn't get too spoiler-specific just yet. Let's just say that, were you to metaphorically Google "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," this intro should be one of the first videos you would get linked to.

In fact, the whole game is effectively a flashback through Lara's life and earlier adventures—utilizing montages cobbled from previous games, as well as scenes from her childhood—that chronicles her most far-flung global adventure yet. Her quest for the truth about her father's exploits and family his-



Lara is able—and sometimes obliged—to track and shoot two different targets simultaneously. "Adrenaline Moments" also slow down time for dramatic actions or escapes.



Travel the world, find priceless treasure, meet a bestiary of exotic creatures...and hurt them. But nice outfit!

Lara's feet and limbs accumulate layers of grime until water washes them clean.

tory (which includes an estimated 45 minutes of well-acted, if talky, cinematics) will take her to the far corners of the Earth, with environments in Coastal Thailand, the Mediterranean Sea, Croft Manor, Mexico, and the Arctic, plus some hitherto unannounced levels.

Utilizing a new camera system *Underworld* showcases an impressive amount of variety in both gameplay mechanics and environmental visuals. With the exception of a short initial flashback-within-a-flashback tutorial, the game proper starts out on the deck of Lara's modestly pimped personal yacht anchored in the Mediterranean, and takes the opportunity to show off her skimpy new wetsuit before she jumps into the great blue below and swims about for a bit.

In the process of free-swimming around the sea-bottom, seeking entrance to the first of *Underworld's* many environments, you'll use two of Lara's newest toys: a personal rebreather offering effectively unlimited oxygen, and a sonar system that maps out the local topography—likely chamber entrances and all—with a single ping. Some incidental monster sharks cruise around, but they're mostly minor annoyances to be neatly dispatched with Lara's harpoon gun.

Once you've emerged from the water into the first dry-land *Underworld* dungeon/crypt/chamber you start to see the full, impressive range of Lara's actions: She can sprint and lunge, do graceful tumbles through quickly closing doorways, expertly balance on, swing from and vault to various jutting poles and beams (this is the first *Tomb Raider* game to use professional motion capture, courtesy of gymnast/stuntwoman Heidi Moneymaker), and actually free-climb on rocky outcroppings that even veteran gamers might have to concentrate to notice.

One of the more understatedly cool new features is Lara's technique of hanging from a ledge with one arm while reaching out for a viable jump-to spot—at least, when one is available. If the ledges and rocky outcroppings just aren't letting her climb as high as she needs, she can work some impressive, back-and-forth wall-kick ascension magic that would give the cockiest parkour macho-man a terminal inferiority complex.

And all the while, on foot or flipping through the air, Lara can still effortlessly crank off rounds from her weapons at any nearby bat, tiger, wall-crawling lizard, wet-suited black-ops-looking human or other enemy—two separate enemies, in fact, if she has her dual pistols equipped. As always, her pistols are not limited by ammo, but other specialty weapons—a submachine gun, say—are. Further, she won't find ammo conveniently just, you know, lying around temples of unknowable age, so these special weapons demand judicious use.

Perhaps most important, however, is the combination of the freely roamable sprawl of the environments and the multi-staged nature of some of the environmental challenges. Whether it's utilizing eldritch-tech gauntlets to manipulate massive stone column puzzles, cracking the code of some Mayan-calendar lock to a subterranean temple, or releasing the proper switches to harass a Cthulhu-scale mega-cephalopod (I really felt kinda bad about that one; it seemed to be more or less minding its own business…at least until I came along and brain-panned it with a spiked stone disc), the puzzles have a really epic quality to them. It takes multiple actions and mini-victories to get, say, that massive, multi-armed statue of Shiva to do its mechanical thing—but when it finally does, you feel like you've by-Genesha accomplished something.

And, yes—Lara still has her classic shorts outfit, as well as the face-slightly-too-big-for-her-head thing going on (so no worries there, longtime fans). It feels, well, kinda cool to be anticipating the final release (in November) of the classic heroine's latest spelunking road show.

Chris Hudak

TEEN

T

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Suggestive Themes
Mild Violence
Strong Lyrics

PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360 LIVE

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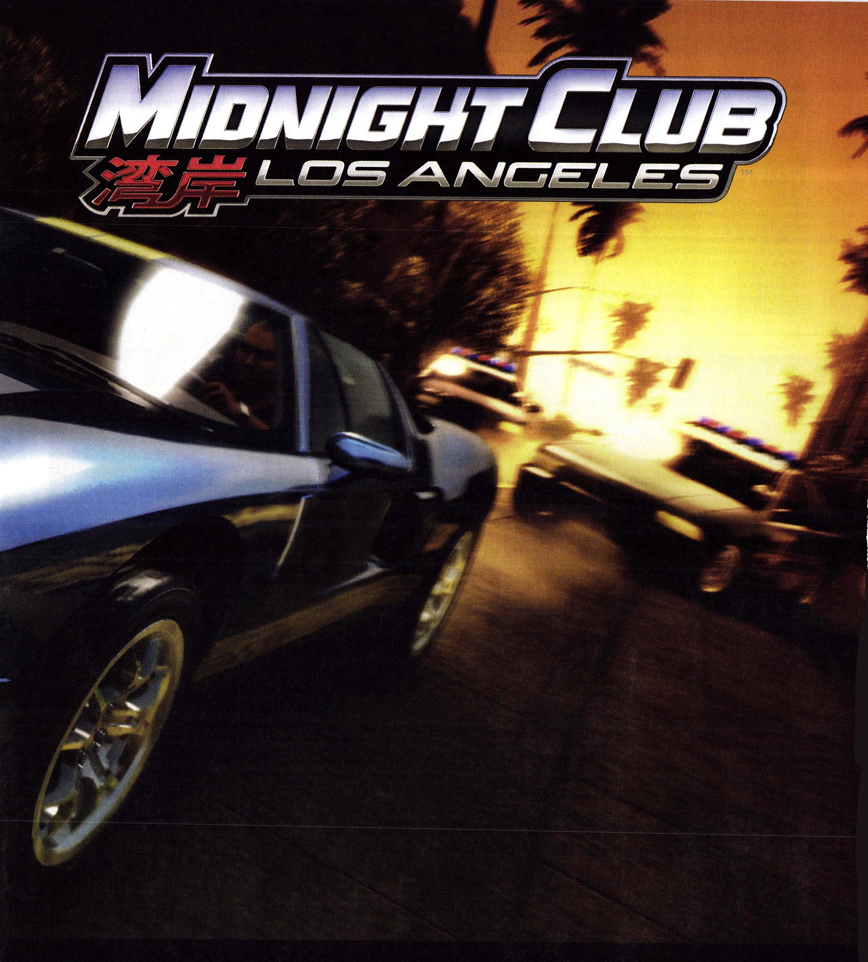

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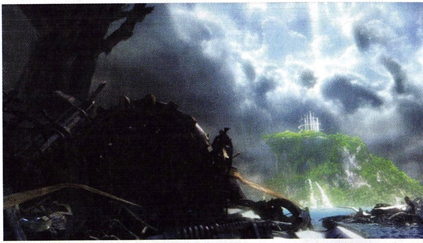
Updates, sneak peeks, works-in-progress

Fantasy Overload!

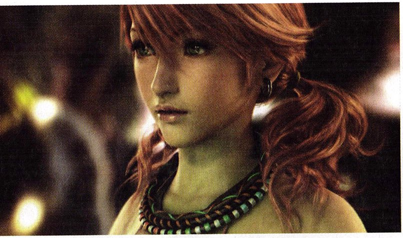
Listen up, fanboys: The time has come to quit your whining about *Final Fantasy XIII* no longer being a PS3 exclusive because, frankly, we PlayStation loyalists are getting a pretty Square deal from our favorite purveyor of androgynous cinematic roleplaying. In fact, a poppin'-fresh batch of new screens and info from the latest bounty of Square Enix games has just arrived at PTOM Towers, so feast your peepers on these lovely treats to help you pass the time until all these games eventually come out. Meanwhile, take comfort in knowing that we still have several PS3 and PSP exclusives, along with the fact that *FFXIII* is being developed on PS3 first, meaning it's likely to look better on our system, even if only by a smidge. And that counts for something, right? Gary Steinman

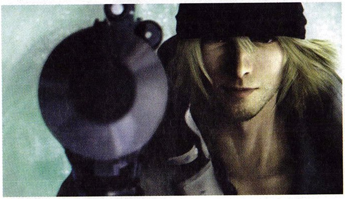


Final Fantasy Agito XIII

PSP AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: RPG PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

Part of the Fabula Nova Crystallis family of *FFXIII*-related games, *Agito* was once planned as a mobile release, aimed at taking advantage of that "platform's" connectivity. Now a PSP game, *Agito* remains an enigma, but it somehow involves multiple characters fighting together in military settings—perhaps some sort of resistance against a bigger nation on the warpath to conquer the world. GS





Final Fantasy XIII

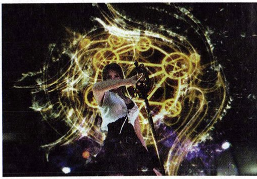
PS3 AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: RPG PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

Our newest crush? That gal with the innocent eyes, warm reddish hair, and ever-so-slight overbite. With no real news about the latest in Square's flagship franchise, all we can do is pine away for this achingly adorable waif. After all, quiet contemplation of beauty is more efficient than getting all hot-n-bothered by the cinematic action sequences promised by this game's razzle-dazzle trailers. That said, if you happen to have a Japanese PS3, be sure to pre-order the Japanese Blu-ray release of *Final Fantasy Advent Children*, which will ship this March with a playable demo of *FFXIII*. No word on the demo coming to the U.S. edition of *Advent Children* (which will surely follow), but we'll keep our fingers crossed. GS

Final Fantasy Versus XIII

PS3 AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: RPG PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

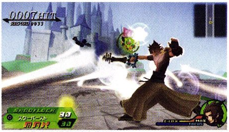
Yes, this one is still PS3-exclusive, so we've got something to crow about. With the promise of more action than the primary game, *Versus* is set within the *FFXIII* universe but offers a completely new and unrelated story. Again, details are sparse, but various Japanese gaming publications have reported that the battle system will be reminiscent of *Kingdom Hearts* (albeit with a much darker tone), with some third-person shooting bits tossed in. Think of a real-time version of the cinematic fight sequences from the *Advent Children* movie and you'll get a good idea of what Square is (probably) working toward. GS



Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep

PSP AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: RPG
PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

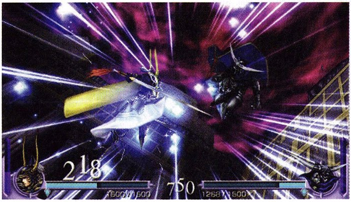
Confused at all by some of the events in the *Kingdom Hearts* games? Enter *Birth by Sleep*, a prequel to the beloved Disney/Square RPG mash-up, which stars three (previously) minor characters who wield Keyblades and are in search of their missing master. Along with enhanced real-time combat and complex platforming sequences, *Birth* includes a host of familiar Disney faces (including King Mickey, Donald, and Goofy) along with all-new enemies called the Unbirth. GS



Dissidia Final Fantasy

PSP AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: Action
PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

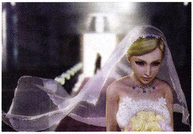
It's a concept that would make a fanfic writer proud: On one side, you've got Chaos; on the other, Cosmos. Naturally, the two forces will engage in epic battles. But here's the best part—each side is populated with stars from Final Fantasy throughout the decades, including Cloud, Tidus, Zidane (my personal favorite—let the angry letters begin!), Sephiroth, Garland, and Kefka. Each character has two types of attacks along with an assortment of dodges, counters, and special moves. But this isn't just a fighting game. *Dissidia* is chockablock with RPG elements: each brawler will gain (or lose) experience points after every battle, and all have the ability to transform during combat if they collect enough items. GS

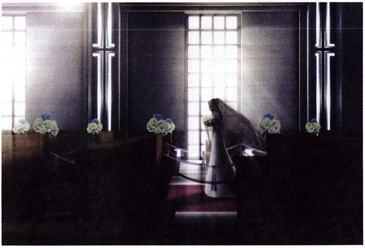


The 3rd Birthday

PSP AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: RPG PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

Originally planned as a cell phone game, this spin-off from the *Parasite Eve* horror/action-RPG franchise once again stars Aya Brea, a New York detective who continually finds herself embroiled with icky, sticky critters out to harm the populace. This time around, Aya will have the Twisted in her sights—a disturbing monstrosity attacking Manhattan via a tear in time. A recent trailer showed Aya walking down an empty church aisle in a wedding dress, only to draw her pistol among disintegrating glass and crumbling flowers. As for what the lovely Ms. Brea was doing there, we still have yet to learn… GS



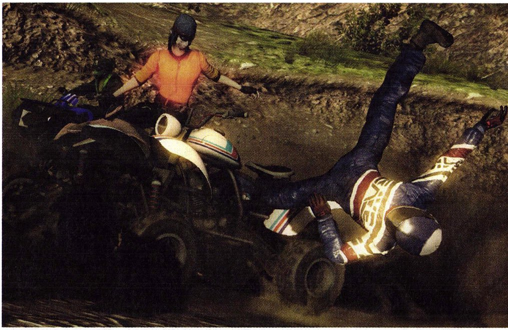


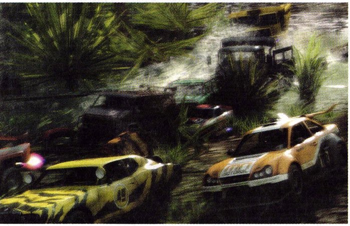
PlayStation Gallery

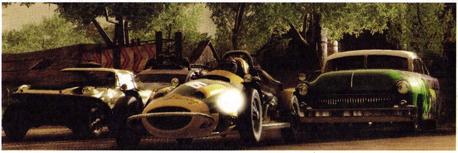
MotorStorm: Pacific Rift Hands-On

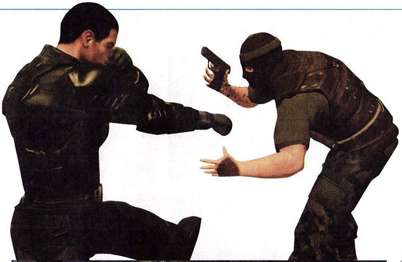
PS3 AVAILABLE: October GENRE: Racing PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: SCEA

At the recent Leipzig Games Convention the *Pacific Rift* demo revealed an excellent new track titled "Wildfire." On a section of island overcome by an erupting volcano, this track is not only tricky because your vehicle of choice—either monster truck or motorbike—will catch fire often times, but the 11 other AI racers are still tough as nails. Fortunately, numerous water shower stations let you cool off and refill your boost ability. Deliciously detailed yet dangerous smoke, haze, and fire effects look great, but make it even more difficult to carve your path as you're trying to overtake opponents. However, the much improved physics and handling are a welcome addition. Not to say that it's at all easy—in our play-through with the motorbike our racer got tossed into the hot coals like an unlucky marshmallow. Yikes! Billy





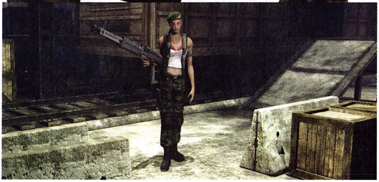


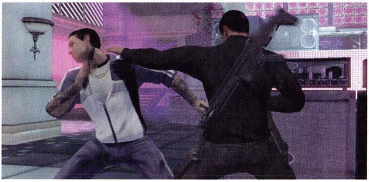


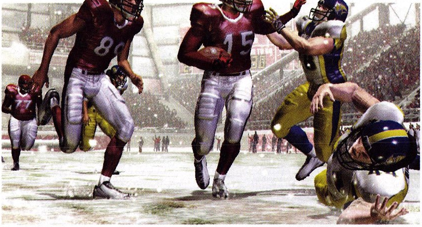
Alpha Protocol Hands-On

PS3 RELEASE: February 2009 GENRE: Action/RPG
PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Obsidian Entertainment

From the fantasy realm of *Neverwinter Nights* to the sci-fi universe of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic,* developer Obsidian has delivered an RPG in various settings. Now it's mixing that genre know-how with an espionage thriller. You'll take the role of Michael Thorton, a cunning spy who finds himself in the middle of several modern day realistic conspiracies. The gameplay mechanic is just as much fast-paced, gadget-laden shooter as it is stat-fueled RPG fare. Thorton will visit such locales as Taipei, Rome, and Moscow in a story that unfolds with the decisions you make. Take out an arms dealer working with the CIA and you may lose the option to get weapons or gadgetry, extort money from him, or even receive future information about a faction. But you don't want to let a bad guy go free do you? In the world of *Alpha Protocol* there is no right or wrong, or good or evil. However, specific reactions to characters you meet could affect the bigger picture in the long run, so we're expecting that making decisions on who to align with will be particularly tricky fun. Billy



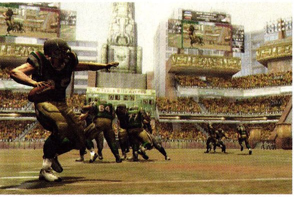


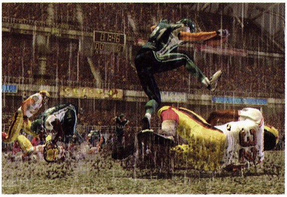


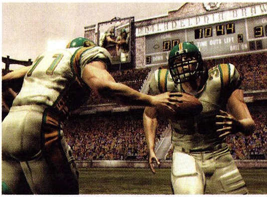
Blitz:
The League II Hands-On

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** November **GENRE:** Sports **PUBLISHER:** Midway **DEVELOPER:** Midway

Madden 09 recreates NFL football with near-surgical precision, but what if you want arcade-style action in which you hit so hard, the other guy needs actual surgery? Meet *Blitz: The League II,* which enables you to target specific body parts when you tackle, resulting in a gory internal view of the expected devastating injury. It's brutally satisfying. There's more black-hearted stuff as well; legal "late hits" mean you can beat the crap out of a guy after you've tackled him, and your players can dope up during their weekly workouts. But it's not as crass as you might imagine, and in what we've seen it looks to play quite well. Finally, having *Mad TV's* Frank Caliendo provide the play-by-play commentary with his brilliantly satirical John Madden imitation is a stroke of genius. Eric







Need for Speed:
Undercover Hands-On

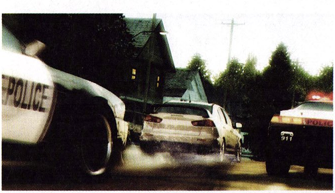
PS3 **AVAILABLE:** November **GENRE:** Racing **PUBLISHER:** Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER:** Electronic Arts

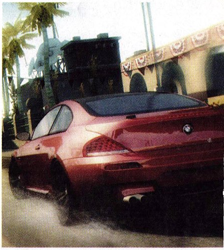
The *Need for Speed* franchise needed a kick in the posterior after its *ProStreet* outing, and this latest iteration looks to give the phrase "the thrill of the chase" a promising new meaning.

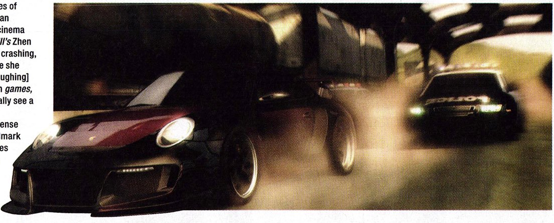
Need for Speed: Undercover's mission-oriented gameplay harkens back to 2005's *Need for Speed: Most Wanted.* You'll take the role of a deep-undercover operative infiltrating an underground street-racing circle to take down an international crime syndicate. Once you're down in the illegal racing scene, all bets are off—and the police patrolling the in-game streets are after you as much as any other common wheelman-thug.

You'll take your cues and guidance from Federal Agent Chase Linh played (in a story-driving series of movie-quality, live-action cutscenes) by American actress, former fashion model, and Hong Kong cinema crossover hottie Maggie Q *(Mission Impossible III's* Zhen Lei). Amid the weaving, screeching of tires, and crashing, I did get to ask her about the little spot of trouble she seemed to be having at the game's control. "[Laughing] Oh, man! It's kinda fun to *hit* people, too! Well, in *games,* I mean! [laughs, shaking her head] Oh, I can totally see a *cop* reading this, going '*waaaiiiit* a minute…'"

The new game boasts significantly more intense and aggressive police behavior, the series' hallmark level of car customization, new licensed vehicles including the Lexus IS-F, the BMW M6, and the Audi R8…and, by the by, the hottest "cover girl" EA has ever courted. *Need for Speed's* newest iteration breaks its cover in the U.S. on November 18, 2008. Chris







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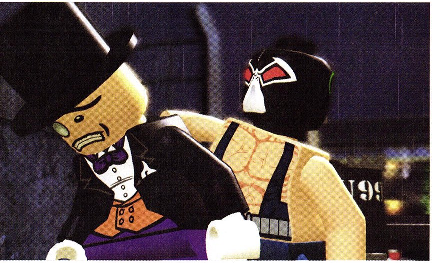
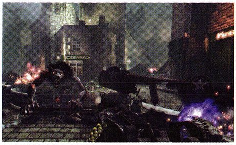
PlayStation Gallery

LEGO Batman Hands-On

PS3 AVAILABLE: September GENRE: Action PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales

What a difference a license makes! Although we dug *Lego Indy,* it somehow lacked the ineffable charm of its instant-classic predecessor, *Lego Star Wars*. But with Batman on the scene, we can't help but fall in love all over again with the latest Lego platform adventure—despite the fact that it's clearly more of the same. In our brief playtest, we dithered around with Batman and Robin as they dashed across the rooftops on the prowl for Catwoman, donning different suits along the way to unlock different powers, including magnetic wall-climbing boots for Robin and a very cool set of glider batwings for the Dark Knight. Other highlights: Riddler's mind-control abilities (dupe a dope to pull some levers for you); Joker's electrified grip (zap your foes into oblivion); and Harley Quinn's oddly charming acrobatics. (We were lukewarm on Mr. Freeze's Freeze Ray, though.) The combat also seems to be a bit more nuanced this time around. We can't wait to see more of the multilayered levels and creative characters—both good and evil—when *Lego Batman* hits this fall. Gary



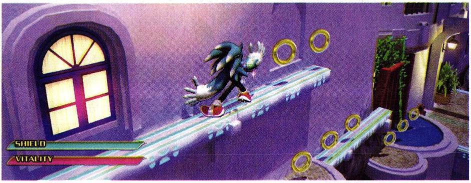


Legendary Hands-On

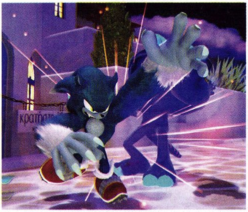
PS3 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Shooter PUBLISHER: Gamecock DEVELOPER: Spark Unlimited

Remember that adrenaline-spiking mission in *Call of Duty 4* where you were racing to escape a sinking freighter while being shot at? *Legendary* feels a lot like that, only its pull-no-punches pace never lets up (at least not during the opening chapters we experienced). Playing as Deckard—a master thief tricked into opening Pandora's Box—you hit the ground running…really fast. The box opens, shooting a sky-searing blaze that makes *Raiders of the Lost Ark's* Nazi-melting relic look like a roman candle, and you're sent on a pulse-pounding trek through a crumbling-to-the-ground museum. Fast-forward a few hours, and you're in Times Square facing a towering golem constructed entirely of metal objects, including cars and news choppers.

These two sequences alone would provide breathless bookends to any FPS's first act, but *Legendary* overflows with this stuff from the moment you escape the museum until you take on that metallic menace. Slick set pieces and scripted events combine to deliver continuous sense-stinging moments—griffons clenching NYPD vehicles in their talons, werewolves making meals of Manhattan's citizens, possessed vending machines firing projectile soda pop. Scenes like these, complemented by solid shooting mechanics and a *Da Vinci Code*-style story, have us counting the days until we crack open Pandora's precious package. Matt

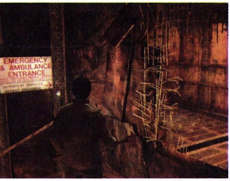


Sonic Unleashed



PS3 **AVAILABLE:** November **GENRE:** Action
PUBLISHER: Sega **DEVELOPER:** Sonic Team

They say the freaks come out at night—so why should Sonic be any different? In his latest high-speed outing, Sonic slows things up when the sun goes down in a series of nighttime levels that focus on combat instead of quickness. Set in the same areas that Sonic blazes through during the day, these darkened cityscapes are prowled by a transformed hedgehog with super-strength and extra-long arms. So instead of barreling through Doctor Eggman's henchmen at 300 mph, you'll smash them to bits with your, uh, werehog claws. Gary



Silent Hill:

Homecoming

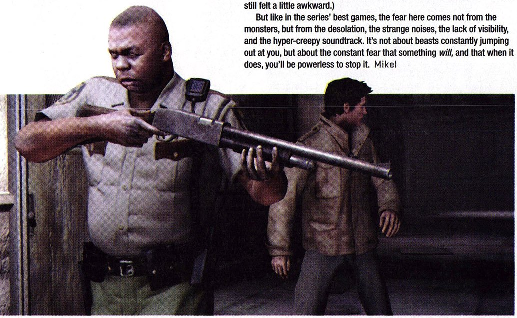
Hands-On

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** September **GENRE:** Adventure
PUBLISHER: Konami **DEVELOPER:** Double Helix Games

Yes, it's true: *Silent Hill* has been handed off to an American developer, but don't be fooled into thinking that they're turning the beloved horror series into a dumbed-down bug hunt. Following the story of Alex Shepherd, a soldier trying to find his missing little brother, *Homecoming* is hitting all the right notes. From its fog-covered environments to the slow reveals whenever you meet a new monster, this is *Silent Hill* through and through.

True, the new combo-based combat system makes the monsters a lot easier to kill, and therefore less scary. Once we figured out which combo and/or weapon stuns a monster type the fastest (thereby opening them up for a gruesome finishing move), we were able to get through most fights unscathed. (Aiming Alex's pistol with third-person free aiming, meanwhile, still felt a little awkward.)

But like in the series' best games, the fear here comes not from the monsters, but from the desolation, the strange noises, the lack of visibility, and the hyper-creepy soundtrack. It's not about beasts constantly jumping out at you, but about the constant fear that something *will,* and that when it does, you'll be powerless to stop it. Mikel



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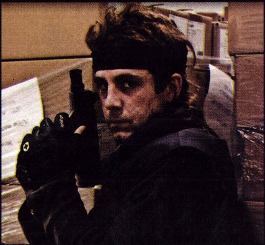

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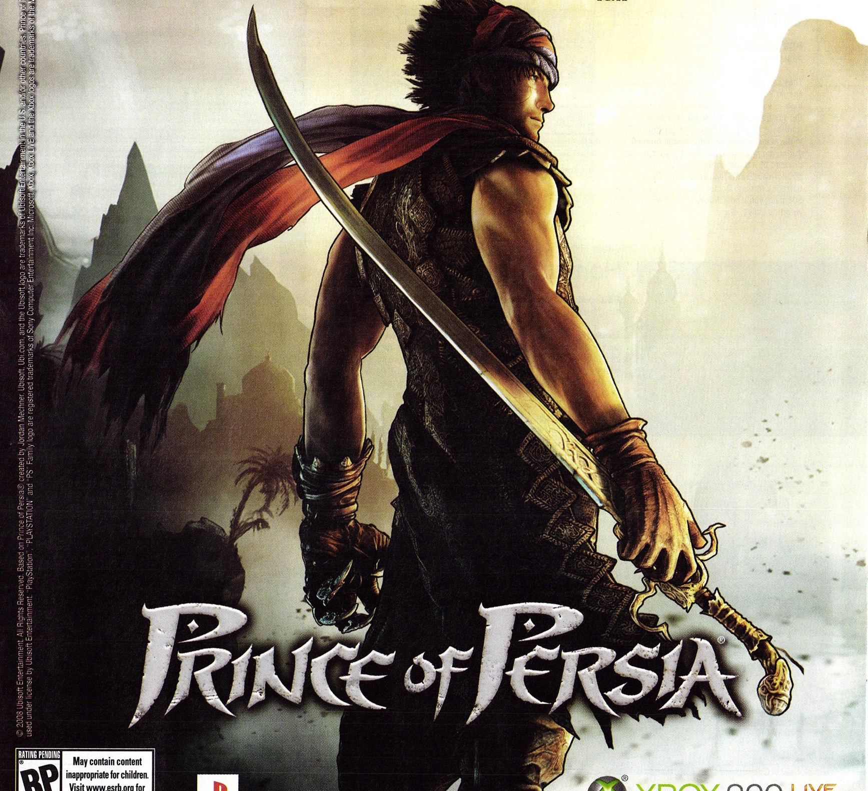

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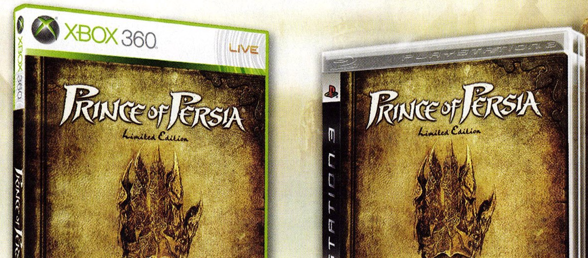
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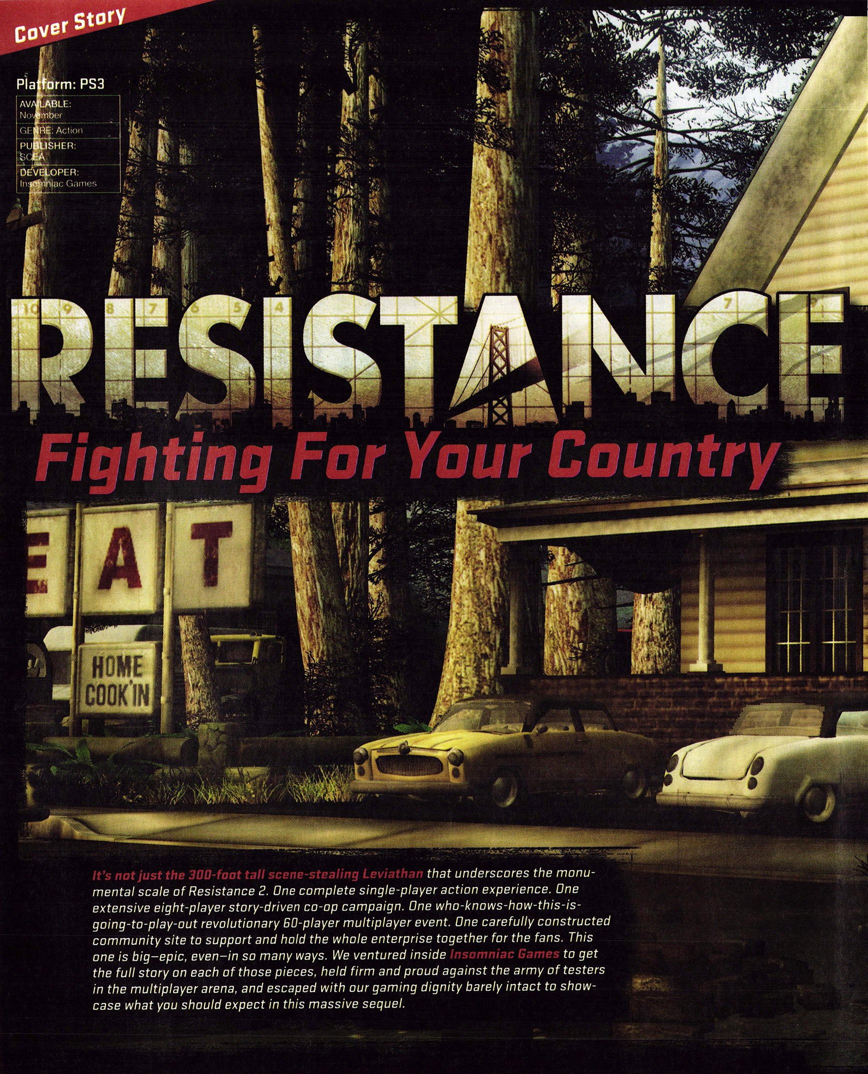
AVAILABLE: November
GENRE: Action
PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games



RESISTANCE

Fighting For Your Country

It's not just the 300-foot tall scene-stealing Leviathan that underscores the monumental scale of Resistance 2. One complete single-player action experience. One extensive eight-player story-driven co-op campaign. One who-knows-how-this-is-going-to-play-out revolutionary 60-player multiplayer event. One carefully constructed community site to support and hold the whole enterprise together for the fans. This one is big—epic, even—in so many ways. We ventured inside ***Insomniac Games*** *to get the full story on each of those pieces, held firm and proud against the army of testers in the multiplayer arena, and escaped with our gaming dignity barely intact to showcase what you should expect in this massive sequel.*

2™

> ...Limbs twisted in ways I can't begin to describe. My wife, my Beverly... I watched as the beasts overtook them and chased them down. I watched her and she watched me too, waiting for her husband to come... this is Henry Stillman, broadcasting from Philadelphia.

Though you're not commanding your squad, their AI is being balanced so they help out in a fight without stealing your kills.

"It's a bone of contention here; by far the biggest game we've done," reveals Ted Price, the erudite president and CEO of Insomniac Games (and also the creative director of *Resistance 2)* upon being asked if he understood the scale of the project when they first set out on a road that has culminated in what could easily be described as three complete games in one. His wry grin hints at many lengthy, likely late night, "philosophical" debates about just how much this tight-knit studio could bite off and chew. "We can do it because we're making it with an existing engine, and can focus on making the story more compelling," Price adds. He clearly won whatever debate transpired.

Really, who's to argue? Over the course of its 14-year history, Price has shaped Insomniac into a studio that has retained its independence amid the peaks and troughs of console development and earned a reputation for always pulling a project together at the end (however the final run-up to that end might look to the outsider). More impressive yet, the company has won prestigious business awards on multiple occasions as one of the best companies to work for in the United States. It takes more than a fridge well-stocked with free sodas to earn those plaudits.

Resistance 2 also represents the fourth game the studio will have

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Weapons that hit the cutting-room floor: "Two years ago we had a prototype weapon—the Tapper," says Price. "It would shoot tubes, and when it hit it would create a blood fountain! But we didn't cut any levels this time...which is a first for us," he adds.

completed on the barely two-year old PS3 (counting *Resistance: Fall of Man, Ratchet & Clank Future,* and *R&C: Quest for Booty).* All of which is to say that if any company is positioned to deliver a massively ambitious, creative, and genre-pushing sequel, on a platform most outfits are still trying to wrap their heads around, Insomniac is it. That's the build up, that's the expectation, and they know it.

THE WAR RAGES

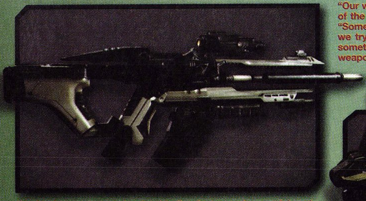
If you missed the original *Resistance* (or didn't see it through to its conclusion), this sequel picks up right where it ended, with Nathan Hale picked up by Black Ops soldiers and brought to an SRPA (Special Research Project Administration) station in Iceland. It's still 1951, but the Chimera invasion/infestation has crept across Europe, leaving few safe havens. Suddenly, the Chimera launch an attack on the SRPA base in Iceland because it's also holding a character named Daedalus, who Price coyly suggests forms a bond of unclear origins with Hale. Where this element of the story leads... well, we won't be giving that away just yet. The whole Iceland battle and incessant bombing culminates with a massive explosion that allows you to escape.

Fast forward two years: Hale has become a lieutenant with the Sentinels, a well-equipped, highly trained Special Ops group who have all proven to be resistant to the Chimera virus. Your team includes First Sergeant Benjamin Warner, an expert with the fast-firing, powerful (and sweet to use and feel) Marksman rifle. Warner is a gearhead with an expert understanding of Chimera technology. Corporal Hawthorn is the aggressive, shotgun-wielding tank of the group that's rounded out by Sergeant Capelli (who's a bit insane, but you'll know more about that if you've followed his story through the supporting viral ARG currently ongoing for series fans; check projectabraham.com if you want to get involved) and his Wraith (the powerful machinegun that also provides a defensive shield). Capelli, according to Price, is interested in the Chimera conversion centers, and has "the most complicated relationship with Hale...but it's different in the beginning to how it ends!" Directed by Major Richard Blake, the head of SRPA, the team will suggest directions for you to go and help explain the back story through its group dynamic and conversations. "We tried to stay away from tactical actions," says Price of the squad relationship in which you're not actually issuing them direct commands "because it can slow down gameplay."

Now it appears that the Chimera have backed off, the remnants of the human resistance believing that to be because their defenses—primarily the Liberty Defense Perimeter system of towers built around the country, and the protection camps within—have held firm.

Wrong.

Suddenly the Chimera attack both coasts. With your Sentinel team, you're stationed on Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay, training in their underwater base. Getting to the surface, you peer across the water as the City by the Bay is pounded by Chimera ➔



The Marksman weapon is a treat to fire; fast-paced, powerful, and accurate, it's likely to become a favorite. Another high point is the alt-fire of the magnum handgun. It fires explosive rounds into any surface, which you can then detonate. Perfect for trap-setting, or hitting and running.

"Our weapon design is sometimes too goofy," says Price of the processes involved in deciding on a new arsenal. "Some of them would work better in a *Ratchet* game. But we try things, then pull back, and we're sure not to do something that nerfs the game, so we're testing every weapon against every enemy."

Seeing the Chameleon burst out of its cloak effect to attack was truly shocking (and sufficient to throw Ted Price off-kilter as the creature then killed him!)

Multiplayer Matters

It's no surprise that the multiplayer components of *Resistance 2*—both the 60-player multiplayer and 8-player co-op—represent a massive investment of both time and personnel. "We want to create a social networking experience to see what happens in the game as it expands beyond the disc," explains community manager James Stevenson.

For co-op, designer Jake Biegel expects the audience to be surprised about just how far the experience goes due to its story-driven underpinnings. In our hands-on time alongside the game's testers, we tried out each of the three classes: the Spec Ops, Medic, and Soldier. You earn experience points for all your actions, but more is allotted to those related to your class (the Medic can insta-heal a fallen teammate in need of reviving, whereas it would take another class a set amount of time to achieve the same goal), letting you eventually earn up to 30 levels in each class.

The maps will also vary in their epic finales, and the parts of the map that you need to traverse in order to ensure the system has significant replayability as you graft toward those higher levels. Augmentations that you earn through your actions will add further variation to each class, such as earning the Medicator for the Medic, or weapon upgrades for the Soldier. The levels themselves will also scale if you have less than the max eight-players available, adjusting the number of enemies and the hit points of the bosses to ensure a fair fight.

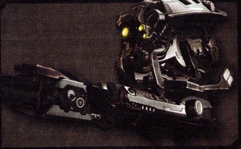
The straight-up multiplayer is a fascinating experience. You can select loadouts at the start of a map, and change mid-game whenever you die. Aside from traditional deathmatch (no 60-player DM, however) and team deathmatch, *Resistance 2's* CTF variant is called Core Control. You can't shoot while carrying the enemy Core, so you need teammates to both back you up and also to get around to the points of interest highlighted on the mini-map.

Skirmish mode involves a land-grab mechanic that uses the same maps as the single-player game. Altogether, the developers estimate that the game has around 70 different modes and map combinations, providing options for full 60-player melees (where your squad is rivaled against another squad, and given specific objectives to ensure the gameplay doesn't descend into a chaotic free-for-all) and three- or four-player variants.

Bottom line: Any time, any place, you should be able to find friends or enemies, teammates or rivals for some fearsome first-person slugging.

Expect updated gore effects from what's described as a brand-new chunk system... "so they'll stick to walls and slide down," says Price. Meaty!

Everyone gasped at the first sight of the 300-foot tall Leviathan that was devastating downtown Chicago. "It wasn't until audio went in, and we got the camera angle of the throw and roll right that we felt it came together," says Price.



Drones buzzing through the redwoods let you know the Chimera are near.

Getting To Know Nathan Hale

The *Resistance 2* story is all about Nathan Hale and his role in this great conflict against the invading Chimera. Gone is the voice-over storytelling from the original. "Internally we wanted to know more of Hale, and focusing on him provided the opportunity to answer questions about him," says Ted Price. "We also had to balance the desire to introduce Hale with having a big, explosive opening."

Hale knows that he's immune to the Chimera virus, but the how and the why are the points revealed in the plot that will run through the *Resistance 2* story from beginning to shocking conclusion. Hale speaks to his squad mates (in the course of setting mission objectives and learning details that fill out the game's back story), "but we weren't sure how it would work," confesses Price. Prolific voice actor David Kaye (he's also the voice of Clank) reprises his role to bring Hale to life in scenes that will be enhanced by the use of Hale Visions. These first-person, real-time moments will show interactions with the other characters that build the evolving story, and Hale's relationships with his squad and the world around him.

forces. Glowing orange, flickering reds and purples, the Embarcadero is engulfed in flames, darkened areas suddenly illuminated by yet another explosion. Overhead airships whiz by, and lumbering motherships send out wave after wave of attackers. It's an incredible spectacle as tracer fire fizzes through the dark sky, and the sound of guns, death, and panic fill the air.

Having fought through the base to the surface, your job is to find and use the aptly named Big Bertha. This land-based gun is mighty powerful, and with a few well-placed shots the mothership limps away from the battle, smoking, and seemingly vulnerable.

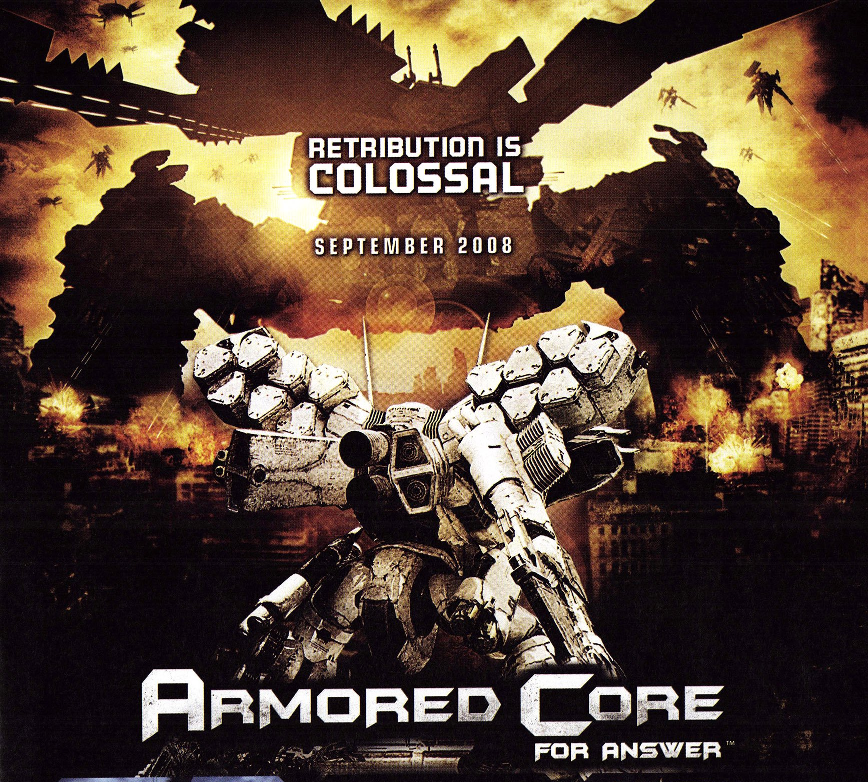
INTO THE HEARTLAND

A potentially crippled Chimera mothership represents an opening to gain knowledge of this fearless attacker, so Hale pursues it to Oric, CA, with the goal to get aboard. His transport is ambushed en route to the logging town, and Hale is thrown out, finding himself alone (well, without his support team) among the redwoods. Despite the beautiful surroundings, Hale will have no time to stop and smell the roses. Flying drones zip across the open sky, reprising the paranoid feeling of Big Brother watching that we haven't seen since *Half-Life 2!*

A rustle in the long grass is ominous, and suddenly a Chameleon—what had been an opaque glimmer, maybe a shadow flickering in our peripheral vision—becomes a hideous foe, up close and all-too personal. The controller in his hands, Price jumps and flails, firing a shotgun more in hopes of hitting and felling the creature than in strategic accuracy. He misses. He dies under the slashing, biting hideousness. He restarts with the debug invincibility code switched on!

The environmental effects are subtle, but impressive when you look closely. "When I play the game now, I see 150 things wrong," Price adds, but each of those details is logged, tagged, and flushed through an internal working mechanic that clearly delivers. To our eye, the texture detail on every surface looks incredibly detailed. As Art Director Chad Dezern walks us through some of the concept art, including scenes from inside that Chimera ship we could see in the distance or from encounters to expect on the streets of Chicago, the accurateness of those concepts to in-game settings is astonishing. "We're playing up the 1950s America scene," Dezern says of the look, "so we're using a subtle grain effect to get that '50s film look."

This design extends to the next location of Twin Falls, Idaho. Why there? "We actually Googled 'farm town' in Google Images and it



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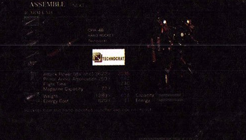

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PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360 LIVE

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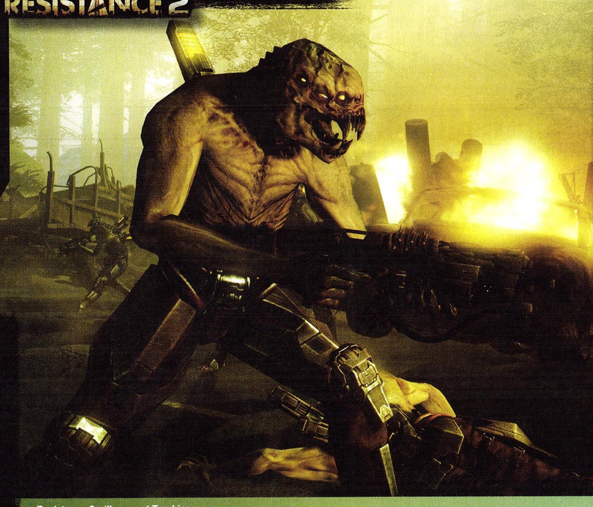
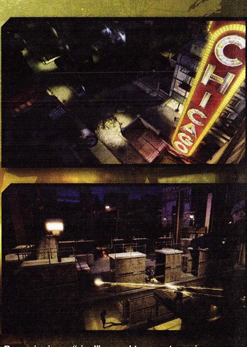


Resistance 2 will support Trophies out of the gate. "We'd always planned on skill points," says Price. Trophies will be awarded for the co-op and multiplayer components, too, "when we figure out what to do to not break the play direction, like encouraging people to run away from their squad responsibilities," added Mike Roloson, lead multiplayer designer.



By assigning a "rival" squad to your team in multiplayer, you're nudged to stay within a certain part of the map, and rewarded for not wandering off on your own. In this way, the 60-player multiplayer matches retain some sense of direction and order. For newbies, you also get rewarded with experience for participating in a kill, even if yours isn't the killing bullet.

Collector's Edition

In a first for an SCEA game, *Resistance 2* will be available in a limited-run Collector's Edition that we expect to retail at around $90. For the extra scratch you'll get a reversible art book (from one side it illustrates the American experience, and from the other the SRPA Files and Sentinels), and an action figure of the Chimera Hybrid. Price confirmed that further action figures in the *Resistance* series would follow post game release.

William Deets (whose game credits include QA involvement in a number of titles) is crafting a novelization of the *Resistance* story, filling in the gaps between the end of the original game in 1951 and when Hale picks up the action for the sequel in 1953. The first three chapters of this novel will be included on the disc, alongside some behind-the-scenes development footage.

Rounding out the package is an exclusive skin for the Wraith weapon that can be imported into your game for that personalized "I'm a hardcore fan" statement.

threw up Twin Falls," Price chuckles as he confesses how the team arrived at the location. This small town also contributes to the variety of environments the team will deliver throughout the progress (from Treasure Island, San Francisco, to Oric, CA, to Twin Falls, ID, to the streets of Chicago and the inside of the Chimera mothership.)

In Twin Falls you see evidence of the Chimeran creep. Spikes buried nose first in the ground indicate that the Chimera are nearby. Sneaking up on the stylized building in a ramshackle town you can pick out creatures patrolling the rooftop. A few accurate Marksmen rounds later and you've popped a couple of guards, but awoken the bigger Ravager. Using a shield and mini-gun, the beast charges, and like a star matador you just keep dodging. The plus side of this encounter is that once defeated, you can snag its weapon!

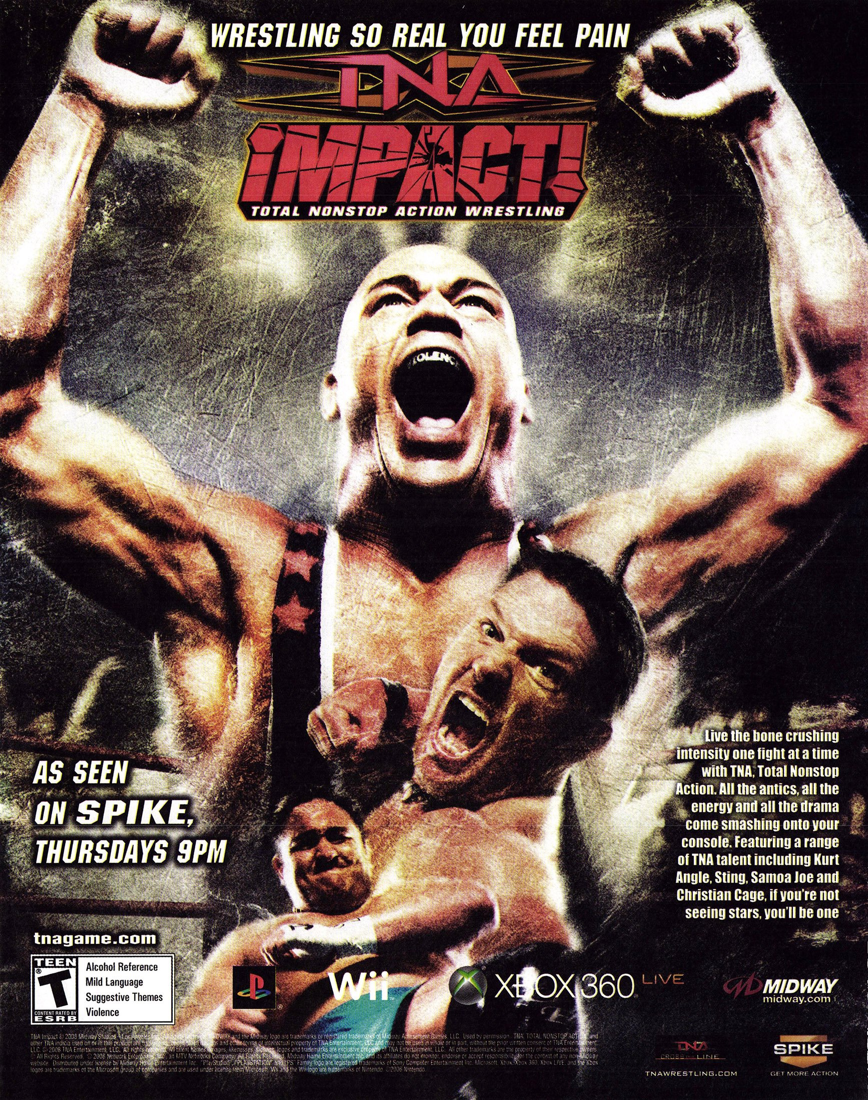
But throughout the town you'll see pink, pulsating, plain disgusting cocoons. These are the remnants of the town's inhabitants, now packaged for Chimera use, and will pop to reveal the multi-eyed Grims. Also joining the fight was the Titan (the tiny-headed beast you can see on our cover), armed with the LAARK (rocket launcher). Manage to take it down and you can snag this powerful device that showcases a really cool alt-fire mode. It shoots a cloud of mini-projectiles that will keep on going, far into the distance. Just shooting at a forest of trees saw the subtle particle effects kick off each mini-rocket, and then pause...and wait for the resultant distant explosions as each projectile connects with something solid.

THE REAL NEXT GENERATION

With such established expertise on the PS3, Insomniac's processes have evolved on many fronts. "We changed our production method to get the vision early—enemies in and working," says Price, "so that at the end we're tuning hit points and going through audio and visual tweaks." Testing was also a big deal this time around. "We took a lot of feedback from the first game," says Price, "from forums and testers, and the audience says they want something bigger." Lessons learned include reinforcing to the player that the alt-fire exists. "It seems obvious, but we have to train people how to use it, otherwise they won't," says Price.

The pacing has also received consideration. "*Resistance 2* has more dips in the pace," says Price, "*Resistance 1* cranked it up to 10 and then stayed at 10. We're offering places to breathe and enjoy the environments you're walking through." Expect the dips in the pace to be punctuated by memorable action moments. Ditched this time around is the need to find health, instead going for a HUD-less display "because with heart rate pounding and tunnel-vision effects, it helps trigger the fight or flight response, and it's better than looking at a gauge," says Price.

Between the single-player detail, action, and improved pacing to better punctuate what's an impressively detailed setting, *Resistance 2* is clearly one of the biggest games hitting PS3 this holiday. After absorbing all that content, as Price sums up, "you'll know you've been in a fight." ■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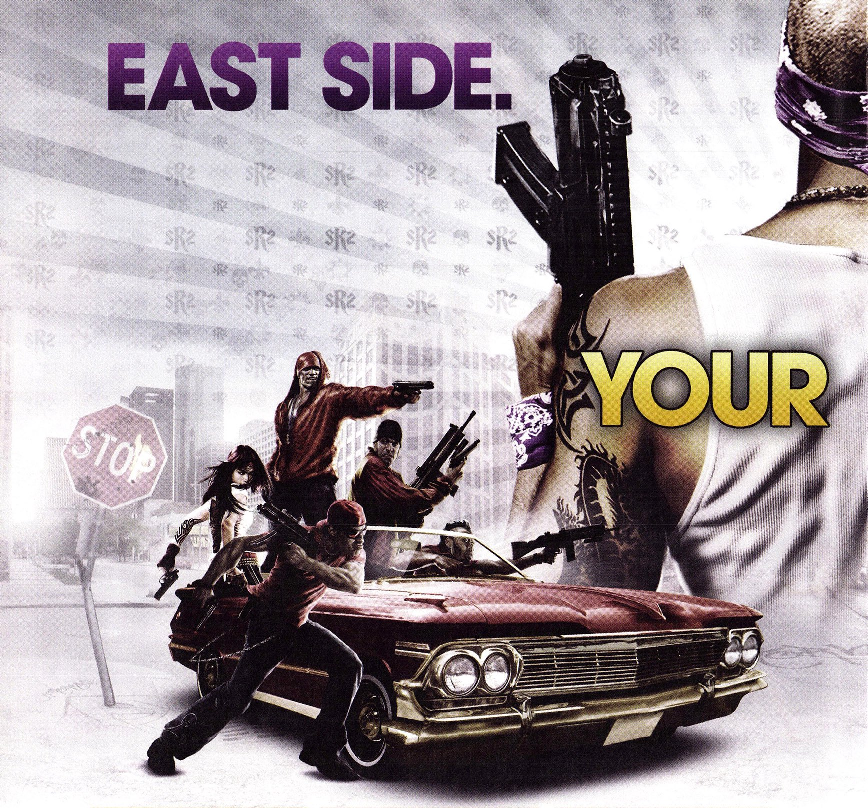

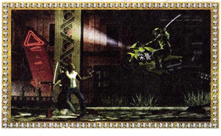

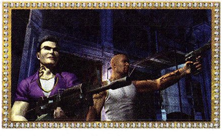

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PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

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RATINGS

★★★★★ **LEGENDARY**
A game so amazing, the entire PTOM staff recommends it. A must buy!

★★★★½ **SUPERB**
Not quite a timeless classic, but one of the finest of its breed.

★★★★ **GREAT!**
A finely crafted, thoroughly enjoyable experience. Worth your time and money.

★★★½ **SOLID**
A strong game. We noticed some flaws, but there's more to like than loathe.

★★★ **ENJOYABLE**
If the topic/license/style is your thing, there's enough to keep you entertained.

★★½ **MEDIOCRE**
An equal blend of sweet and sour. Discerning gamers can find better.

★★ **SCARRED**
A smattering of entertainment hidden amongst an abundance of flaws.

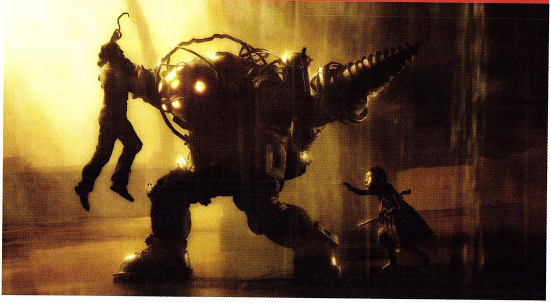
★½ **FRUSTRATING**
"Argh!" will be the self-created soundtrack of this game. No thank you.

★ **PAINFUL**
We played it so you don't have to. Now you owe us cookies.

½ **BROKEN**
Hey, it comes in a free plastic box! Wee!

Recognize the faces in the photos? If so, email their names to PTOM_Letters@futureus.com for a chance to win a copy of *BioShock*. Label your email "Famous Faces" to qualify!

GAME of the month | BioShock p 70



Meet the experts delivering your buying advice

Oh boy, oh boy. PTOM Bio(graphy)Shock. Those feint of heart, look away now.

ROB SMITH
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Despite his gruff, godless exterior and his utter disdain for children and all things "kiddie," Rob's heart is melted by fluffy kittens. His desktop wallpaper is the cuddly Phoebe, and he's been rabbiting non-stop about adding another fluff-muffin to the household. If we hear "fluffy-wuffy-kitten-pusses" one more time, after cleaning up the vomit we're just going to have to beat him. Thoroughly.

NOW PLAYING: *Resistance: Fall of Man, Tiger Woods 09, PixelJunk Eden (Trophies!)*

TERESA DUN
ASSISTANT EDITOR

One of Teresa's secrets is that she used to wish she were male, so she could just be "one of the guys," since her interests were preceived to be "masculine." (She's changed her mind since then! Boys are smelly!) Another shocker? The first time she played through *FFVII,* it was on the PC! ("Please don't hate me! I lived overseas, and it was the only version I could get!")

NOW PLAYING: *Soulcalibur IV, Uncharted* (for the Trophies!), *Star Ocean: FD*

KEN BOUSQUET
ART DIRECTOR

Ken practically exudes "Northern California," what with his mellow vibe and healthy, wholesome lifestyle. But back in the day, Mr. Bousquet was quite the Hollywood rabble-rouser. Some of Ken's keenest Hollywood memories: David Lynch told him a joke about a piece of string. He talked to Madonna on the phone. Played soccer against Rod Stewart. And he had an eye contact moment with River Phoenix.

NOW PLAYING: *FIFA 08, GRID, Soulcalibur IV,* real-life soccer

GARY STEINMAN
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

When Gary was still in college, he vowed to never become a journalist. (Didn't want to follow in his father's footsteps…) And yet he ended up spending half a decade in financial and business news, including a stint at *Working Woman* magazine! Later, when Gary was at a different PlayStation magazine, he wrote profusely about his disdain for anime—only to end up running an anime magazine for five years!

NOW PLAYING: *BioShock, R&C: QfB*

ROGER BURCHILL
MANAGING EDITOR

Roger has enough skeletons in his closet to raise an Army of Darkness, but we'll only mention the ones that won't result in incarceration. Longtime game mag readers may recall that Roger's superhero alter ego was "Barf Lad" when he worked on *Game Players* magazine. He also has an unabiding love for musicals (both film and stage) and once had a near-tragic encounter with hot sauce during a stupid food dare.

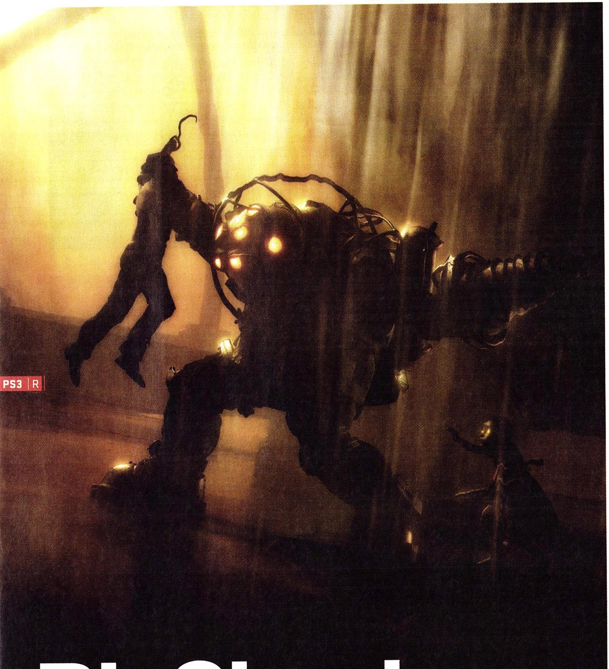
NOW PLAYING: *Yakuza 2*

SCOTT BUTTERWORTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Scott has often made mention of his former career as an editorial intern, but what he didn't tell you is that he interned for…*The Official Xbox Magazine!* Gasp! Heretic! But if it makes you feel any better, he never owned an original Xbox but did invest many hours into his PSX and PS2. He also never paid for a *Halo* game. Suck on that, Master Chief! Scott does still frequent our sister mag's office for their notorious cuddle sessions, but we'll wean him slowly.

NOW PLAYING: *Pure, Skate 2, Civ Revolution*

SURGERY
Dr. Steinman's Aesthetic Ideals
ETERNAL FLAME



PS3 | **R**

BioShock

A man chooses

PS3 **PRICE:** $59.99 **ESRB:** Mature **PUBLISHER:** 2K Games **DEVELOPER:** 2K Marin, 2K Boston, 2K Austrailia, Digital Extremes

PlayStation The Official Magazine
★★★★★
Editors' Choice

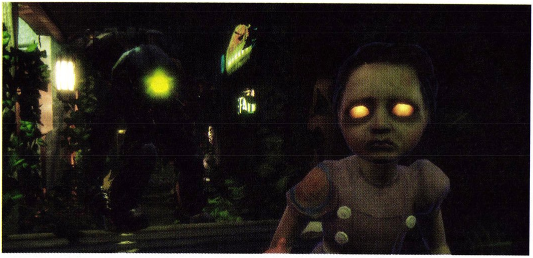
I have a choice to make.

My nerves are frayed after several tense hours struggling to stay alive in the decaying, dystopian underwater city of Rapture. First, my plane crashed in the middle of the ocean. As the lone survivor, I swam to a glowing spire—a beacon of hope—looming in the distance. Upon entering the tower, I was assaulted with the first in a continual series of utopian ideals plastered upon the walls around me: decadent notions about the triumph of reason, the ascendancy of man, the so-called great chain that we all pull together. "No Gods or Kings. Only Man."

Problem is, mankind has left this godforsaken city. Or, perhaps *mankind* is the wrong word here. After all, Rapture is overrun with the mutated remnants of this fallen society. Genetically modified, mentally mangled "splicers" are everywhere, and they don't take kindly to intruders. Indeed, mankind hasn't left Rapture—but *humanity* has abandoned this leaky ship.

I've seen countless corpses, witnessed intense acts of brutality, listened to the twisted, hopeless audio diaries strewn about this city of a citizenry gone bonkers. I've killed, using a mere handful of tools—a wrench, a pistol, a machine gun. (I had yet to find some of the more exotic weaponry.) I've genetically altered my own body to keep pace with Rapture's ruptured world, learned how to zap my foes with Electro Bolt blasts, torch them with my Incinerate plasmid, or toss them around with a handy helping of Telekinesis.

And now I've just faced down a Big Daddy, a hulking, groaning, stinking monstrosity that looks like an old-time diver's suit shot up with steroids, equipped with a giant drill bit and the wherewithal to use it. Indeed, leave a Big Daddy alone, and chances are it'll ignore you in return; when you're that powerful, you don't need to be the aggressor. But disturb the lumbering giant—or worse, threaten its ward, one of the creepy Little Sisters—and it will



At the heart of the game are the Little Sisters, who roam throughout Rapture harvesting ADAM from corpses. Will you kill them to liberate all the ADAM, and thus power yourself up with better plasmids and tonics? Or will you rescue them, doing a good deed but limiting your ADAM supply in the process?

become rancorous beyond control, attacking you until one of you is down for good. It was a gut-wrenching, nerve-wracking battle, but I won. I think my hands are shaking, but I'm not sure; I'm gripping my rumbling DualShock too hard to tell.

And now I have a choice to make: I can either harvest the ADAM inside the Little Sister, killing her in the process but yielding a much greater supply of the invaluable substance that makes everyone all that more powerful in Rapture; or I can rescue her, freeing her from an awful form of slavery, but depriving me of a significant portion of the only commodity worth anything in this utterly fetid metropolis. Part of me is ready to just kill her and be done with it, but some small shred of decency is pushing its way into my psyche. What to do? I have a choice to make, and it isn't easy.

»Interlude 1: The Port

Before we continue with the review, let's get something out of the way: This is a port of a former Xbox 360 (and PC) exclusive. Some of you have undoubtedly played that game, or watched your friends play it, or at the very least have read about it on the web or in other magazines. It was 360 game of the year for most outlets in 2007, so it practically couldn't be avoided.

So for those already in the know, there's only one real question: How'd the port turn out? The short answer: perfect. Basically, the game works, which is the most important thing. And it looks fantastic. During my weeklong marathon session playing *BioShock* at my desk, several staffers stopped by to gawk at my TV screen, some of whom had even played the Xbox original and claimed that the PS3 version looks even better. (These were unprompted, fully candid comments, mind you.)

A few other quick words about the port: The story and game haven't changed one bit, but all DLC that was ever made available for the 360 is now on the disc, and the game includes a cranked-up difficulty level called Survivor. Playing on Survivor is a masochistic endeavor, but you'll need to do so if you ever want to earn the game's vaunted Platinum Trophy.

The great chain

BioShock is a game about choices. Will you save the Little Sisters or will you harvest them? Will you take the time to explore the city of Rapture, or will you barrel through in a singular pursuit of the endgame? Will you spend your hard-earned ADAM on defensive tonics or offensive ones? Will you hack the hostile cameras and turrets—and endure the minigame—or simply destroy them?

But here's what that makes *BioShock* so special: Every choice in this game seemingly matters, and you will be rewarded for every decision you make. And I'm not talking about endings; there are only two of those, and there's only one way to get the "good" ending. I'm talking

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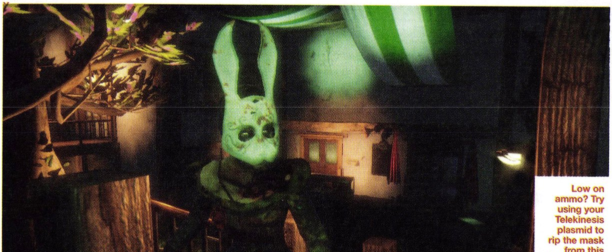
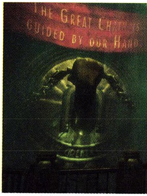


Low on ammo? Try using your Telekinesis plasmid to rip the mask from this Splicer, then hurl it back at her for a nice smack in the face.



Don't shoot Sander Cohen...at least not until later. Trust me, it's worth the wait.

Three painfully obvious yet utterly essential observations about BioShock

IT'S SCARY. I was warned. My co-worker Teresa told me I'm in for some frights, and yet I still approached the game with an audacious bravado. Indeed, play the game with your headphones on in a dark room and you'll be wound up tight, ready to leap out of your skin at the slightest provocation. Everything from the incredible sound ("I hear footsteps…wait, are those mine or…oh crap, what the *%& is that!!") to the almost-cliché horror movie tricks ("Hrm… lemme search that 'dead' splicer over there…%^*@, she's still alive!!") is set up to surprise you. And that's not to mention the utterly disturbing sights you'll stumble across during your tour of Rapture…

IT'S BIG. I spent about 20 hours playing the game for this review. I could've spent another half-dozen hours easy, if I wanted to seek out every last tidbit. (Which I plan to do very soon.) And it's not just the amount of game that surprised me, but the depth of the story and the detailed characters who inhabit Rapture.

IT HAD TO BE IN FIRST-PERSON. Really. And not just because it's a fun shooter; the story is also best experienced from a first-person perspective. I say this for the benefit of other gamers who might not be FPS aficionados, because the mechanic will make sense even to you. I speak from experience here.

FARCRY 2
COMING THIS FALL

RATING PENDING

RP

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

May contain content inappropriate for children. Visit www.esrb.org for rating information.

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

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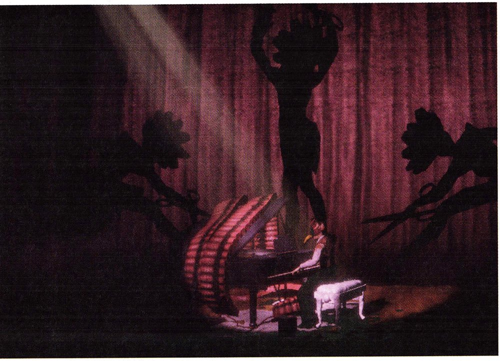
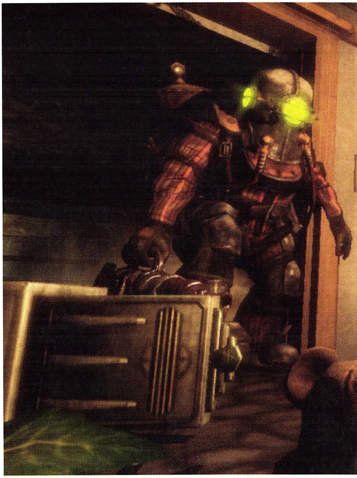




You'll know a Big Daddy is nearby before you ever spot it, thanks to its bone-chilling guttural moans and ominous ground-shaking bootsteps.

Medals of honor

Plink! "You have earned a Trophy."

For some of us, *BioShock* will be our first real experience with Trophies, and after earning 44 of them in my initial play-through, I finally get it. I understand why Xbots are so crazy for Achievements, and I now know that driving urge to play, play, and play again to unlock them all. If anything gets me to try my hand at Survivor mode—with the Vita-chambers (basically, your resurrection booth) turned off—Trophies are it.

My first Trophy came easy. Toaster in the Tub is a bronze award earned when you shock an enemy in the water, a nifty trick the game actually prompted me to do. Numerous other bronze Trophies are earned simply for playing through the game and defeating bosses, although plenty come from unnecessary diligence or delightfully creative acts. Silver Trophies are reserved for bigger events, like finding every single audio diary or not harvesting any Little Sisters. Gold comes when you beat the game under certain punishing conditions. And the sole Platinum Trophy is earned when you unlock them all.

about the economy of the game and how it compensates you for just about every action.

Take the Research Camera, an item you receive fairly early in the game. By snapping pics of various foes, you gain research points, which reward you with various power-ups: increased damage to an enemy, decreased damage from an enemy, the ability to instantly hack a hostile security bot, additional health, and so on. (Don't worry, the reason for having this camera is explained in the game.) For someone like me who simply isn't as adept at first-person shooters, this camera was invaluable; it let me basically "level up" in a manner that was both enjoyable and informative. But for someone more accustomed to an FPS, the camera can be ignored altogether, allowing for a faster pace to the game and a much greater challenge throughout.

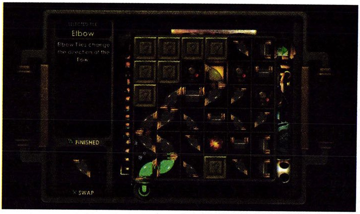
Or consider the act of exploration. *BioShock* amply rewards you for all that extra time you might spend seeking out every nook and cranny—and not just because the game is so astoundingly beautiful. Sure, the endless details may seem reason enough to simply stop and look around, peeking out the windows into the watery depths to marvel at the shimmering city around you or gazing into every corner to soak in the majestic grandeur of the art-deco trappings juxtaposed with the intense claustrophobia of a World War II submarine. The broken-down city of Rapture is suffused with abundant details, but *all of them matter*. Hidden in an alcove you might find an audio diary that fleshes out the story. You might notice the glimmer of gasoline on the floor (as opposed the ever-present puddles of water)—perfect for blasting with a fire plasmid to stop a splicer horde from hunting you down. See that canister in the corner? Try attaching a proximity mine to it, then using your telekinesis to toss it at a distant foe. Rifle through the pockets of every corpse to gain some much-needed ammo, search inside cabinets for clues—no matter where you are in the game's world, you'll be rewarded if you choose to take your time. But again, if you're the impatient type solely driven to win, your lack of exploration will reward you with a greater challenge to the gameplay. From the action to the narrative, every single choice matters—an astonishing statement when it comes to a game this expansive and ambitious

»Interlude 2: Objectivism

At this point in the review, some of you might be wondering about the story. Hopefully by now you've got a general impression of *BioShock's* world, thanks to the screens and art along with my delightfully elegant prose. But as for the narrative itself? Well…that's where it gets tricky. The story is so full of incredible shocks and surprises that it'd be a shame to spoil *any* of it. That said, the overall starting point is this: The year is 1960 and you enter a secret underwater city built several years ago by Andrew Ryan to house great minds who will be granted the freedom to thrive without the parasitic constraints of government or the fantastical delusions of religion. When you enter this city, however, the submerged metropolis has already degenerated to the point of utter chaos. You goal: to help a mysterious man named Atlas (who communicates with you via radio) find his family and escape to the surface.

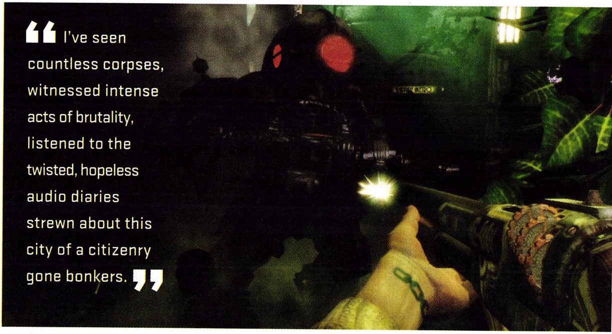
Naturally, there's more to it than that.

One other important note: Much of the story is suffused with the philosophy of Objectivism, a school of thought created by author Ayn Rand. (Note the similarity in names between Rapture's founder Andrew Ryan and Ms. Rand.) At risk of gross oversimplification, the central tenets of Objectivism are: Man is at his best when he pursues a rational self-interest, and unfettered capitalism is the ultimate form of society. Take these two notions to their extremes, though, and you end up with Rapture…



How to win turrets and influence security bots

As if the endless stream of spooky Splicers wasn't enough to make your trip through Rapture a tense test of your survival skills, you'll also face hostile mechanical measures including flying bots, deadly turrets, and pesky security cameras. Get close enough and you can hack them via an intense (but utterly reptitive, especially the 50 billionth time you do it) mini-game where you must quickly swap tiles to create a clear path from start to finish. Once hacked, these security measures will work for you—a *big* help in some situations.



> "I've seen countless corpses, witnessed intense acts of brutality, listened to the twisted, hopeless audio diaries strewn about this city of a citizenry gone bonkers."

Bountiful harvest

To be sure, the game's not perfect—but *BioShock's* biggest foible is also its greatest asset: the story. As if following the three-act arc of a movie, the narrative hits a turning point about two-thirds in. Without giving anything away, it's a fantastic moment, hinted at throughout the game yet a stunning surprise nonetheless. From that point forward, however, the game seems to barrel to its inevitable conclusion in a series of levels that don't quite live up to those earlier on, culminating in a rather limp final encounter. In any other game, the quality of that final third might be perfectly acceptable, but in *BioShock* the standards had already been set so much higher. I almost wish the turning point either happened earlier, giving me more time to fully explore Rapture from a different perspective, or later, condensing the drawn-out time between the "big event" and the "final one."

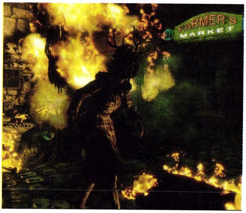
No matter—*BioShock* is still a remarkable achievement, a triumph of gameplay and narrative that everyone should choose to play.

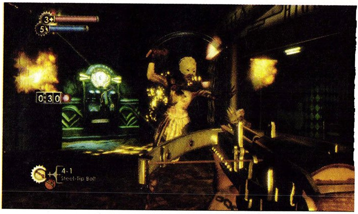
Speaking of choices, for those of you who're curious: I rescued that first Little Sister, and I was rewarded with one of the most touching sequences in modern gaming. Then, about 20 minutes later, I had an opportunity to rescue another Little Sister and I mistakenly hit the wrong button, harvesting the poor girl into icky oblivion, leaving me with a sick feeling in the pit of stomach. At that point I immediately restarted the entire game (yes, I forgot to save) because I had made up my mind to rescue them all—then I proceeded to stay at the office until midnight in order to replay everything I had done up to that moment. And you know what? Despite the tight deadline I was facing, I didn't regret a single second of the replay time—the experience is *that* good.

Now I can't wait to replay the entire game...and harvest them all.

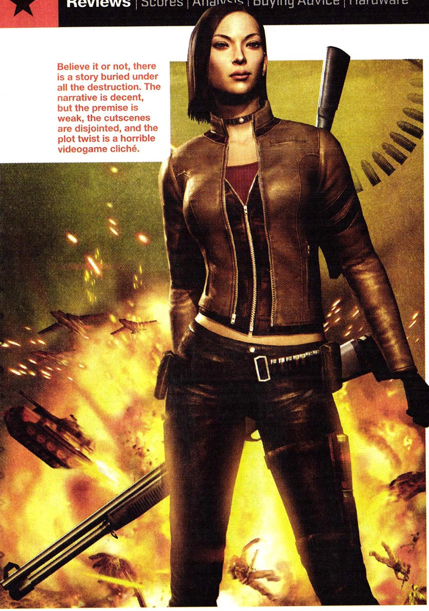
Gary Steinman

★★★★★





Several types of Splicers roam the sordid streets of Rapture. The toughest ones? Houdini Splicers, which can teleport and use plasmids against you, and Spider Splicers, which crawl along ceilings using their deadly hooked blades.



Believe it or not, there is a story buried under all the destruction. The narrative is decent, but the premise is weak, the cutscenes are disjointed, and the plot twist is a horrible videogame cliché.

Mercenaries 2:

World in Flames

Ironically, this one won't set the world on fire

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: Pandemic Studios

In the months leading up to the release of *Mercenaries 2,* whispers were heard in the deepest corners of the Internet: "Could it be better than *GTA IV?"* they said. "It covers a whole country, not just one city, and you get to drive tanks and drop bombs and destroy everything!" Indeed, it absolutely radiated potential. Well, it's finally here, and I'm sorry to report that no, it does not live up to *GTA IV.* Not even close.

Let's start at the top: *Mercenaries 2* is a technical mess. The profoundly lackluster graphics are riddled with last-gen problems, from constant pop-in to a crippled draw distance. Clearly sacrifices were made to accommodate the size of the world, but honestly, I'd say they sacrificed too much, especially since that size ends up being more burden than asset. The AI is just stunningly bad (why would you stop driving the car just to jump on the mounted gun in the back?) to the point that it would be hilarious if it weren't so annoying, and the anemic sound effects make AK-47s sound like cap guns.

Even the highly touted destruction is a letdown, as environmental elements feel patronizingly flimsy. When you can ride a motorcycle through a giant tree without so much as flinching, that's a problem. Destroying buildings with a tank, helicopter, or airstrike provides the only satisfying form of destruction, though tanks never survive assaults for very long and powerful helicopters are particularly hard to find, or take an eternity to earn. And those cool airstrike explosions you saw in the trailer? They only occur many hours and unimaginative missions into the game.

And while I don't know if such problems will be widespread, I personally experienced a number of fairly serious glitches, including one incident where my health meter got stuck and I became totally invincible. It was awesome except for the fact that my screen kept flashing red.

The game's not all bad, however. Both the driving and shooting components demonstrate tight, solid controls—even if most of the vehicles and guns feel roughly the same—which translates into respectable, though not remarkable core gameplay. Plus, once you manage to slog through the tedious early portions of the game, you do have access to a pretty awesome arsenal that would be overkill for most missions but can be wildly fun when you're simply wreaking havoc. And finally, many of the game's problems begin to fade into the background when a friend drops in for some co-op.

Mercenaries 2 is not a bad game. It's an overly ambitious game that falls tragically short of its goals. You just have to be willing to fight for the fun parts, and the best way to accomplish that is to bring a friend.

Scott Butterworth

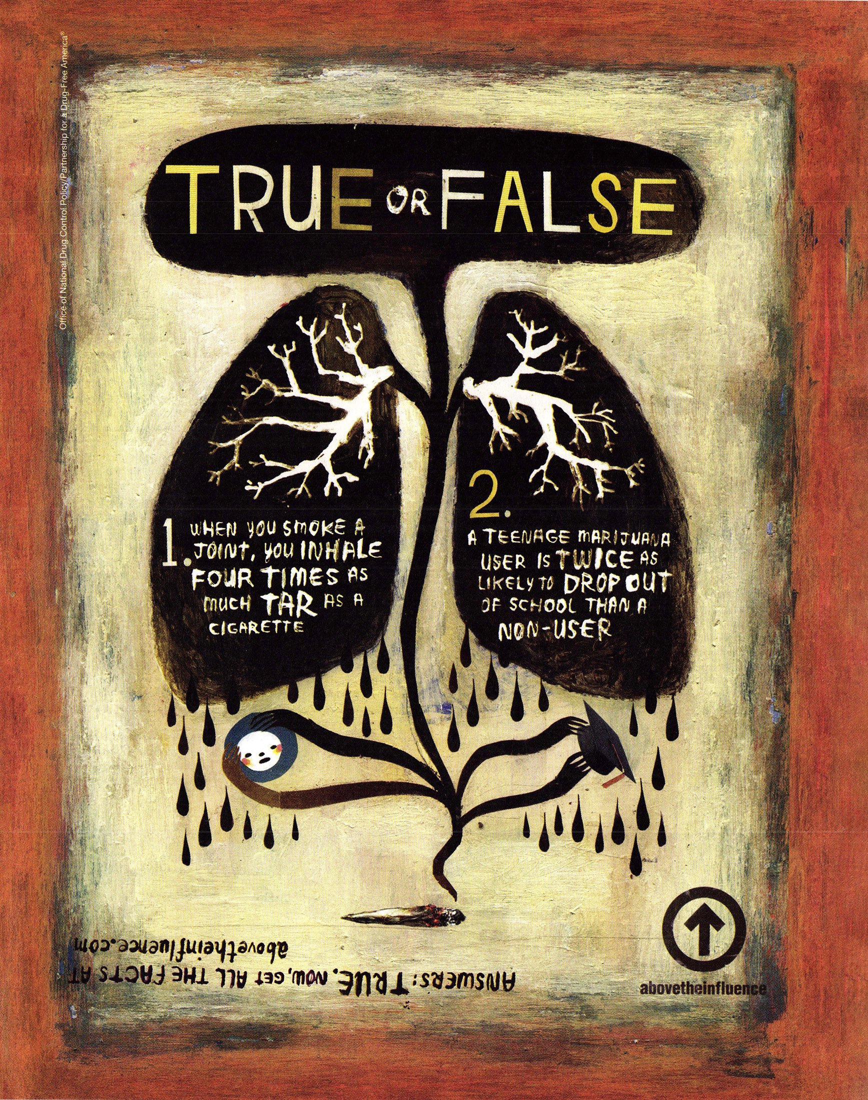
★★★

PS3 | R

Most of the missions are essentially side quests, but you've got to complete them if you want to be able to buy all the heavy weapons.

The game takes place in an incredibly large recreation of present-day Venezuela, which looks impressive but becomes a real chore when you have to travel from end to end in a slow-moving chopper.

Despite what you might expect from a game about violent, sociopathic mercenaries, there is absolutely no blood in *Mercenaries 2.*


TRUE OR FALSE
1. WHEN YOU SMOKE A JOINT, YOU INHALE FOUR TIMES AS MUCH TAR AS A CIGARETTE
2. A TEENAGE MARIJUANA USER IS TWICE AS LIKELY TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL THAN A NON-USER
ANSWERS: TRUE. NOW, GET ALL THE FACTS AT abovetheinfluence.com

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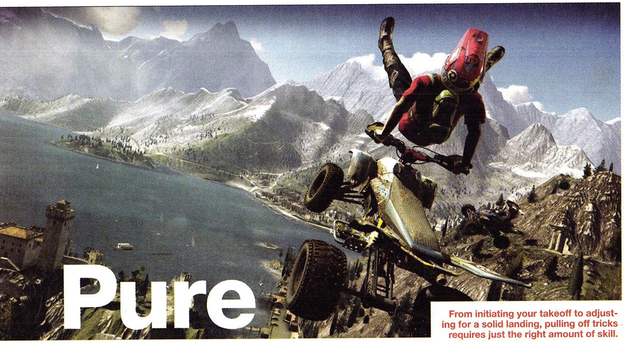


From initiating your takeoff to adjusting for a solid landing, pulling off tricks requires just the right amount of skill.

Pure

Not drug related, but still addictive

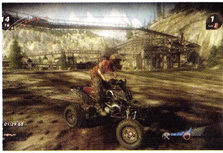
PS3 **PRICE:** $59.99 **ESRB:** Everyone
PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive Studios
DEVELOPER: Black Rock Studios

PS3 | R

SSX on ATVs. Not a perfect analogy but it's darn close, and fans of the seminal snowboarding franchise should probably just stop reading now and go buy this game. But for the uninitiated, let me elaborate: *Pure* is an off-road racing game that's as much about reality-defying stunts as it is about fast lap times, and it strikes such a brilliant balance between accessibility and challenge, simplicity and depth, that even those who aren't generally fans of racing games will find its arcade formula addictive.

Like any good arcade racer, *Pure* emphasizes fun over frustration. You blast through sprawling outdoor environments—from picturesque Italian mountains to beaches in Thailand—perpetually at full throttle, enjoying the impressively tight handling and surface-specific traction (which works nicely except for the occasional frictionless mud puddle). The AI—far from being out to get you—feels pleasantly realistic, with the field of 15 other riders over-committing to tricks and flying from their bikes just as real-life drivers would, and when it's your turn to eat dirt, the game is quick to respawn you. The entire experience feels blessedly forgiving, which really helps to up your overall enjoyment.

But the real fun stems from the over-the-top, Motocross-inspired tricks you get to throw down. Flick the left stick to catch air, and once airborne, you can hold or tweak your moves for more points (though the tweak button can be finicky) and even add flips. Trick consistently enough and you'll earn a Special Trick—reminiscent of the Uber-Tricks in *SSX 3*—which you can execute over any of the dramatically huge, slow-motion cliff drops. Tricking also fills your Thrill Meter, which allows you to perform more complex and higher-scoring tricks or cash it in for a speed boost, making it the crux of the game's surprising layer of strategy.



By the end of any race, your rider will be caked in mud. Gotta appreciate the attention to detail.

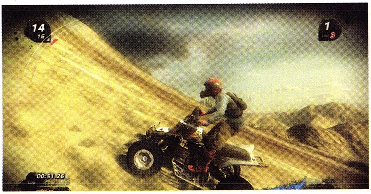
Pure isn't perfect, though. The game's three event types—Race, Sprint, and Freestyle—provide an initial dash of variety but never evolve. Every event feels almost exactly like the one before, mostly because your ride doesn't change (aside from the incremental improvements you unlock as you play). And while this might be expected in a racing game, the problem is exacerbated by the constant re-use of tracks and events and the lack of any evolution in the spectacularly cliché characters, effectively robbing you of any compelling motivation to continue beyond a natural desire to win. This certainly doesn't ruin the game, but it does start to drag by the end and could have been prevented through greater variety or character development.

Still, the exhilarating racing and addictive tricking, combined with superb visuals, flawless technical work, and competent online multiplayer (sorry, no split-screen), should be more than enough to get your motor running.

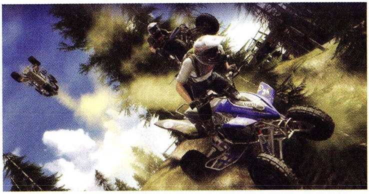
Scott Butterworth

★★★★½

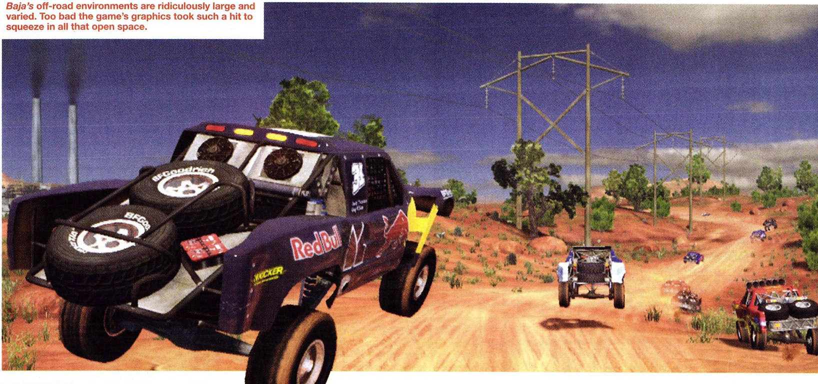
The developers at Black Rock seem to have an affinity for aircraft. Keep an eye out for a helicopter or hot air balloon hovering around nearly every track.



Sprint events feature shorter tracks with fewer jumps and require stronger racing technique, but pulling one big trick could give you enough boost to edge out a win.



Though every track has multiple paths, there's never a shortcut to victory. The path you choose is simply the one you enjoy riding the most.



Baja's off-road environments are ridiculously large and varied. Too bad the game's graphics took such a hit to squeeze in all that open space.

Baja's take on the 1000-mile Baja 1000 takes over three hours to complete. That's short—the real race usually takes over 30.

Baja:

Edge of Control

Slippery when wet...or dry...or on concrete...or on grass...

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: 2XL Games

The Baja 1000: a three-hour tour through all nine environments.

Well, the designers of *Edge of Control* certainly got the name right. This expansive off-road racer crams in an almost absurd amount of content...but somehow manages to flub one of the most crucial elements of good racing game design: control.

It's clear that *Baja* is aiming for a kind of realism rarely attempted by an off-road racer. And it succeeds in a lot of different areas. The enormous environments, for example, feel unusually organic, encompassing a variety of discrete areas. This allows for a rare diversity in courses and race styles; the same environment can host quick sprint races as well as several grueling, long-distance affairs, allowing for a shocking *95* different courses for the 40 or so vehicles to compete on.

It's just a shame that the graphics are so uneven. While some environments are quite beautiful, many are positively hideous, with blocky, pixilated scenery, and occasional dirt effects seemingly plucked from a PS2 racer. Obviously some graphical detail was sacrificed in order to squeeze in such enormous environments. Unfortunately, the graphics still take an occasional performance hit when more than four or five vehicles are onscreen at once. (One happy surprise, though: The 10-player online mode was smooth and lag-free throughout my play time. And while multiplayer includes nothing beyond the basic race modes, it's competently put together.)

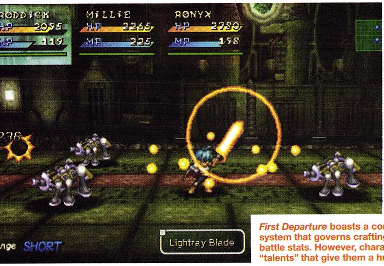
Also adding to the realism are the vehicle upgrade and tuning systems, which are extensive and deep—we're talking *Gran Turismo* levels of customization here, from springs and shocks to gear ratios. Trouble is, none of the upgrades seem to sufficiently address *Baja's* biggest flaw: It always feels as though you're racing through deep sand. Always. Every vehicle slides around every turn with an alarming lack of control. This is very likely intentional; it does require the kind of driving finesse usually reserved for pure-sim racers.

But in the game space, that's just annoying. If it happened only when you were racing on deep sand, I'd be fine with it. But no matter what the terrain, you'll slide across it like it's buttered. This frustration is compounded by the bizarrely magnetic collisions: In many cases, if you make contact with another vehicle, even lightly, you'll stay locked together long past the point where you need to take a turn, often in spite of attempts to veer off.

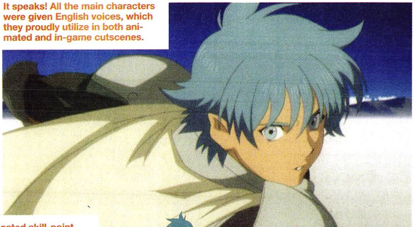
This doesn't kill *Baja*, but it does turn a game that could be a heck of a lot of fun into something more closely resembling work.

Joe Rybicki

★★★



First Departure boasts a complicated skill-point system that governs crafting, group crafting, and battle stats. However, characters can also possess "talents" that give them a huge boost in crafting.



It speaks! All the main characters were given English voices, which they proudly utilize in both animated and in-game cutscenes.

MILLIE:
I'm MILLIE Chliette

Star Ocean:

First Departure

Finally! The first Star Ocean released in English

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Square Enix

The night I beat *Star Ocean: First Departure*, I dreamt that I shrunk five feet, seven inches and was living on the Star Ocean UMD inside my PSP as a citizen of the planet Roak, where most of the game takes place. I had violet hair with fuscia highlights, like Pericci (a hidden cat-person I recruited into my party). I wielded a bow and a slew of black magic spells, like Ronyx (a space captain from Earth who visits Roak to try to save the planet from a virus that's slowly turning everyone to stone). I had my Sketching, Recipe, Performance, and many other skills leveled up to max, so I was an accomplished artist, chef, and musician. And as I traveled across the rather miniscule world map fighting hosts of random bunnies, thugs, and sandworms, I finally decided to make Van City my home, because I fell in love with the town's stone terraces, autumn-colored leaves, and homey wooden furniture.

Okay, so maybe I didn't really dream that (whether I fantasized about any of it is completely irrelevant), but the paragraph above paints an accurate picture of the experience *First Departure* offers: old-school Japanese-style action-RPG mechanics housed in PSP caliber graphics with detail-drenched environments. Is it groundbreaking? Nope. It's a remake of a Super Famicom title that was released in 1996, after all. But is it fun? To fans of classic games like *Final Fantasy VII* and *Secret of Mana*, absolutely. Though it's not quite as good as either of those titles.

First Departure is short for an RPG. Even after venturing into all of the hidden dungeons, I completed the game in less than 30 hours. However, *First Departure* not only encourages replays—it demands it. Eleven characters can potentially join your party, but you can only enlist eight of them per playthrough. To experience each character's full backstory, you have to participate in optional—and somewhat random—"Private Action" sequences that can be triggered in towns.

As much as I adore old-school JRPGs, *First Departure* has a major flaw: it's too easy. Maybe I leveled up too much at the beginning, but after the first two hours, battles were barely a challenge. Combat consisted of me spamming the attack button. The end result? I spent a small portion of the game browsing the internet while my fingers blindly—and successfully—pressed three buttons. Even so, *First Departure* has transitioned so smoothly to the PSP that it's definitely worth playing if you're curious about *Star Ocean's* origins or if you're itching for a charming and portable classic RPG. Teresa Dun

★★★½

If you recruit Pericci and trigger a Private Action at the right time, you can obtain a Bunny Whistle, which lets you traverse the world map quickly, without random battles.

First Departure's story includes time travel, space travel, magical blood that makes objects invisible, a demon world, werewolves, winged humanoids, and more. Chaotic, and it just barely makes sense.

SOME ARE SWORN TO PROTECT THE GODDESS. TO SURVIVE, YOU MUST DESTROY HER.

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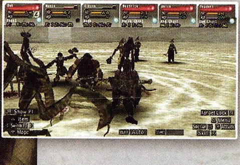

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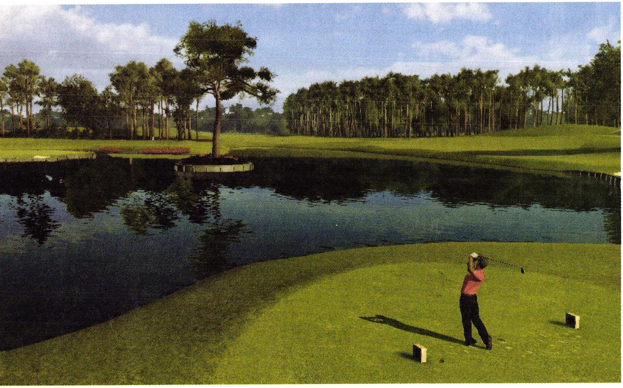


Anyway you look at it, all of the golf courses look pretty amazing in glorious HD.

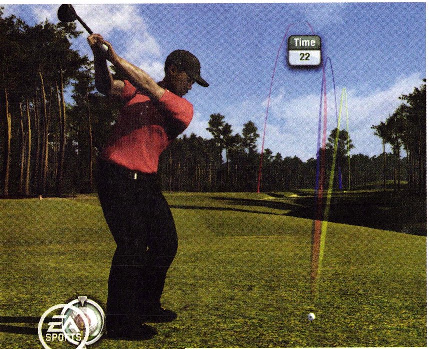
Tiger Woods

PGA Tour 09

Tiger's coach steps up (because Tiger must have been busy that day)

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: EA Tiburon

PS3 | R



Successfully complete a challenge to boost your stats, then pump them some more with timed tests.

Among the annual brood of EA Sports games to warrant the big feature upgrades, *Tiger Woods* seems to have drawn the shortest of the straws. Certainly the impact of this year's improvements is less significant than those showcased in *Madden, NBA Live,* and even *NHL.* Whatever the reason, it's hard to get too enthusiastic about the introduction of Tiger's coach, Hank Haney.

Far more gamer-useful than having Haney assess your skills and provide feedback—"you need to work on your short game," yeah, thanks chief—is the fast track to earning a starting set of abilities in power, accuracy, short game, and putting. Out on the range you take aim and earn a natural score that then determines your on-course abilities (modified by your choice from the four starting difficulty levels). You waste no time getting into the swing of PGA Tour competition if you enter career mode, but it ain't easy when you're averaging 220 yards a drive, and hitting a five-iron 150 yards. In between rounds (you can set two-round tournaments, which I chose, with four rounds for the Majors) Haney helps you boost your stats with challenges that are way more fun and accessible than those forced on you in previous years. Timed bonus rounds add more potential for stat-padding.

To channel Stan Lee (via Spider-Man), with great power comes great responsibility...and for your virtual golfer that means the more distance you get off the tee (and fairway), the more careful you need to be with your accuracy and direction.

For series veterans, *Tiger's* core control mechanic remains the same: tight, effective, and challenging on the top difficulty level (seriously, I was earning trophies—with a lower-case "t", not actual Trophies—for putting prowess quick-smart on the lower levels, but with every pull or push of the left-analog stick amplified at the higher level, the challenge around each course was that much more effective.)

The new club tuner system fails to ignite much excitement, despite Haney's enthusiasm for your repeated swings. The new courses (Sheshan, China, Wentworth, England, and Wolf Creek, Nevada) look solid, though the crowds are still way too passive to balls hurtling towards them.

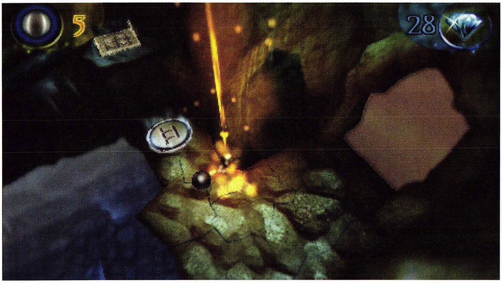
Online, the ability to play simultaneous shots in four-player rounds is a hugely welcome advance, given that even solo a carefully constructed round can take nearly an hour. So if you've passed on *Tiger* since, say, 2006, the incremental upgrades here are worth the investment, but if you're looking for significant upgrades over last year, then unless your time is precious for online rounds, you won't find too many improvements.

Rob Smith

★★★½

Art imitating life: My first round at Pebble Beach (which I'm lucky enough to have played once for real), I birdied the first hole, just like my real round. And then fell apart on the 6th, just like real life!

Who is Involgamus? The relatively new Lithuanian codeshop cut its teeth on casual games like *Barbie As The Island Princess*.



Metallic balls can stand the most stress, except when it comes to water, which will rust it away lickety-split.

Fading Shadows

Roll your soul

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Agetec DEVELOPER: Involgamus

You can almost hear the bong water bubbling in the background during the writing session for this game's backstory. A brief snippet:

"To save her brother, Aira has sealed Erwyn's soul within a single teardrop and transformed the teardrop into a protective orb. Now, in order to free her brother she must safely guide the orb into the Castle of Heaven using a magical beam of light."

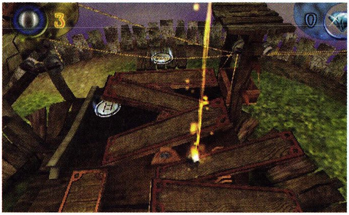
Wowza. I think I got a contact high just typing those words.

Don't be put off by the fanfic-worthy fantasy yarn, though—*Fading Shadows* is actually a very pleasant surprise: an innovative puzzler that combines a nifty twist on the rolling-ball brainbuster with architecturally layered levels and atmospheric music. Rather than controlling the ball itself, you control a beam of light that you can widen or tighten in order to adjust the level of gravitational pull. The standard metallic ball is your most durable option, but it'll rust in water. The other two options: a fragile glass ball and a lightweight but flammable wooden ball. Knowing when to use each type of ball plays a major role in finding your way to each level's exit—but it's not just a straight slog; many of the levels include clever riddles involving everything from movable mirrors to elaborate runes.

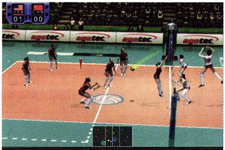
Aside from its meager length (the 40 single-player levels can be beaten in a handful of sessions), the only real knocks against this otherwise delightful diversion are technical ones—but to be fair, they're doozies. Topping the list are the excessive load times, followed by an unfriendly camera and sporadic glitches when the light beam gets stuck on an odd bit of a level. But worst of all, there's no level-select option even after you beat the game, so unless you have a save file for each individual level, you can't replay a specific level without replaying the entire game—a shame considering how creative some of the levels are.

Gary Steinman

★★★



The tighter the beam of light, the more powerful your pull. Be careful, though—too much power and you might destroy your orb!



Whoa, so meta. Agetec is sponsoring a game...in its own game!

Women's Volleyball Championship

Mannequins make terrible champions

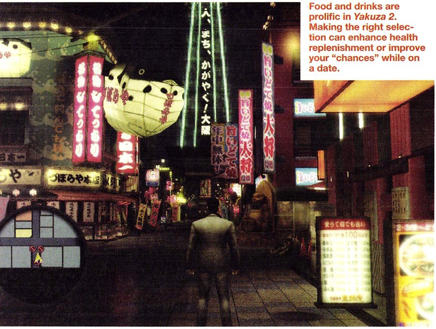
PS2 PRICE: $14.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Agetec DEVELOPER: Spike

Videogame interpretations of beach volleyball have tended to focus (understandably) on babes in bikinis at the beach. *Women's Volleyball Championship* strives to move the attention back where it belongs: on the authentic competition. Unfortunately, that "competition" is as lively and entertaining as foosball figurines without the foosball table—and that's not just because the players are missing the small (you might say functional) bikinis. All the action happens inside a stadium (though beaches are tantalizingly mentioned), with graphics that seem more at home on the PSone and crowds that are as lively as cardboard cutouts. Despite the Create-a-Character mode and campaign to become world champion, the game is so lackluster (and the controls are so frustrating) that the only ones excited are the announcer and celebrity co-host, Nancy Williams. We're not asking for much: even just a grunt while spiking would liven up the on-court action. Unfortunately, this niche sport has spawned a niche game that lacks the more obvious draw of the beach variant, and will interest only the hardest hardcore fans.

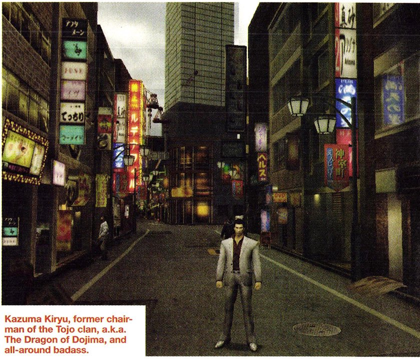
Carlos Ruiz

★★

Lohan
WS 200 cm Pts. 0



Food and drinks are prolific in *Yakuza 2*. Making the right selection can enhance health replenishment or improve your "chances" while on a date.



Kazuma Kiryu, former chairman of the Tojo clan, a.k.a. The Dragon of Dojima, and all-around badass.

Yakuza 2

How do you say, "Revenge is a dish best served cold" in Japanese?

PS2 **PRICE:** $29.99 **ESRB:** Mature **PUBLISHER:** SEGA **DEVELOPER:** SEGA Studios

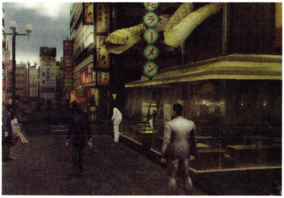
If a game is a sum of its parts, then to understand and appreciate *Yakuza 2* you'll need to have a fondness for *Grand Theft Auto*, bits of *Resident Evil*, and quirky JRPG gameplay conventions. This mishmash doesn't gel so obviously, but surprisingly, the blend manages to produce one of the best PS2 experiences in years.

The *Grand Theft Auto* element is encapsulated in the relatively free-roaming environments of the nightlife districts of Tokyo and Osaka. For the PS2, the size and intricacy of the areas available for exploration is impressive. Interacting with people to acquire information and uncover side-missions is central to the gameplay experience, but it's the frequent hand-to-hand and weapon-assisted showdowns with rivals and random street thugs that establish the game's defining flavor. While always satisfyingly brutal, the seemingly simplistic combat system disguises a surprising amount of depth, and new moves and skills are acquired throughout the game. Button-mashing can work, but you'll dispatch enemies far more efficiently if you learn and master the system and weapons you acquire. Bottom line: You know a fighting system is good when you're still discovering unique, surrounding-sensitive ways to pulverize an opponent's head near the end of a 60-plus hour game.

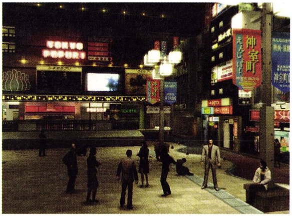
The *Resident Evil* aspect isn't related to the supernatural, but rather to *Yakuza 2's* overall look and gameplay feel. The graphics, particularly during interior sequences, are bathed in that last-gen sheen, alternating between impressive and awkward. Maybe I was partaking of *Yakuza's* in-game bar drink menus too liberally, but I kept channeling Chris Redfield robotically walking around nicely detailed environments. *Yakuza* protagonist Kiryu also seems to have borrowed Chris' storage system that invariably requires you to travel clear across town to your lock box to retrieve the one item you need to clear a mission. When someone asks for a [INSERT RANDOM OBJECT HERE], it'd be nice if we could dispense with the whole object-management dance of futility.

Which brings us to the JRPG play mechanic issue. Like a JRPG, *Yakuza 2* has a ridiculous proclivity for side-missions, is populated with an insane number

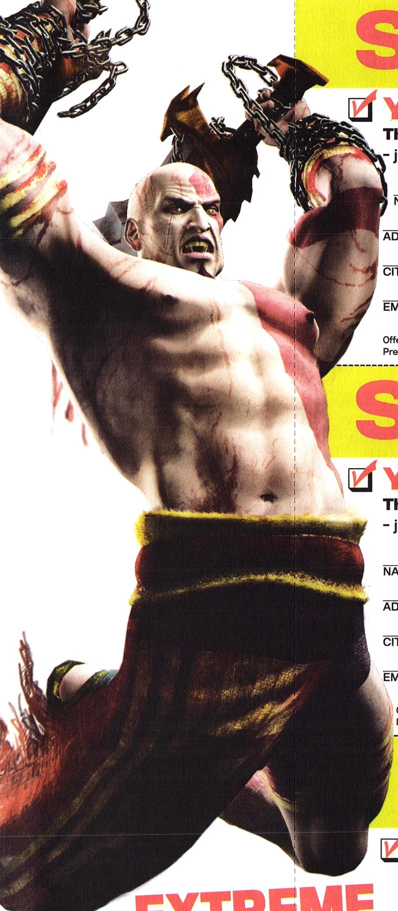
Are you hardcore? Complete the game and you unlock a Premium Game mode you can play on Hard. Complete that mode and you unlock an Extra Hard Game mode!



Gameplay is long and deep. You can probably speed through the game in 40 hours or play it relatively thoroughly in 80 hours, but conquering the game entirely may entail a couple hundred hours.



Make no mistake, *Yakuza 2* deserves its Mature rating. It's rife with graphic violence, foul language, and sexual situations.



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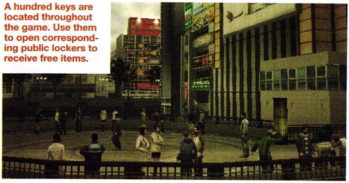


A hundred keys are located throughout the game. Use them to open corresponding public lockers to receive free items.

of items whose purpose and usefulness is entirely unclear, and requires frequent, rarely avoidable random combat encounters ad infinitum to level-up your abilities. It's easy to be lost in periods of monotonous repetition as you try to figure out what to do next, or whether you're properly equipped and empowered for the next major plot-imperative confrontation. But *Yakuza's* saving grace is the satisfaction when you uncover and fulfill a character+need+object scenario and reap its rewards. A strong puzzle ethic percolates beneath the surface of the core action game; the question is whether you have the patience to uncover this satisfying level of depth.

While the whimsical fusion of game styles in *Yakuza 2* is intriguing, it's the robust storyline that holds the entire concoction together. Written by Japanese novelist Seishu Hase, the game's story is pulp fiction at its finest. Seemingly stereotypical characters are often revealed to be multi-dimensional. Plot twists and revelations expound upon the world situation established in the first *Yakuza* game. And perhaps most importantly, the deft interweaving of themes of fate, destiny, and regret is both touching and tragic. It's a quality of storytelling that's relatively rare to the videogame medium—one that makes it easy to forgive any imbalance and shortcomings in gameplay, just so you can see what happens next.

Enjoy it, PS2 owners. This is one to savor.

Roger Burchill

★★★★

Sidelines

Side-missions are an integral part of the *Yakuza 2* experience. In fact, you'll spend more time trying to complete them than the actual core experience. Some are more entertaining and rewarding than others:

Games and more Games

HIT: The Baseball Batting Cage ranks as a favorite—after clearing Pro mode, you'll be challenged by an American ball player who'll bet his Japanese girlfriend that you can't hit 10 home runs off of him. (Yes, he's wagering his girl, not wagering with her.) Other sports experiences: golf driving range, bowling.

MISS: The arcade games and slot machines are mildly entertaining diversions, but besides besting specific challengers at YF Fighter, the rewards don't warrant the time invested. Of course, this could just be the game being realistic, as I never win at the slots in Vegas, either.

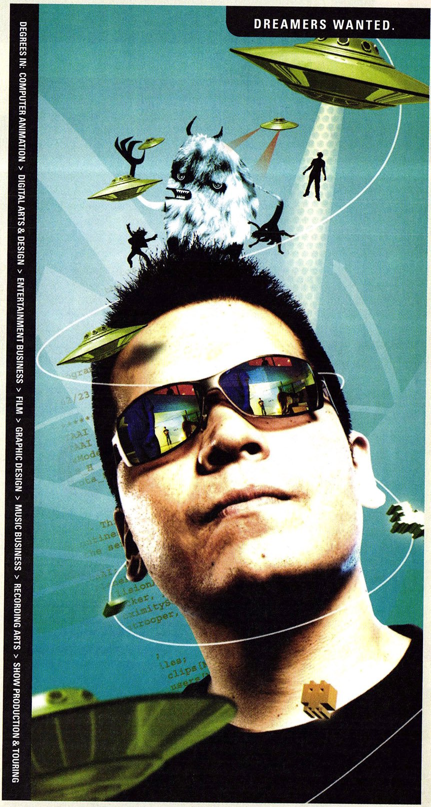
DISQUALIFIED: Success at Mah Jong and Shoji can reap decent rewards, but unless you're already well-versed in how to play these games, there's little chance for sustained success.

Girls, Girls, Girl

HIT: And hit on some more. You'd think that I've been rejected enough times in real-life to last a lifetime, but you'd be wrong. Chatting up hostess girls and trying to attain the proverbial notch in the belt proved to be one of my favorite pastimes. The payoff is decidedly G-rated in an otherwise R-rated game, but the sense of personal satisfaction is...healing. Sad, but true.

MISS: Assuming management of a Cabaret club is a side-mission that requires an inordinate and irritating investment of resources and time. The cajoling and bribing necessary to keep your hostess staff happy and producing will have you regretting that you're a "good" Yakuza who doesn't slap his employees around.

DISQUALIFIED: Since Kiryu's ward, Haruko, is either being kidnapped, constantly following him on his outings, or witnessing a variety of violent and otherwise unwholesome activities, our anti-hero earns a major fail in the parenting department. Kids—they're so cute, but what a pain.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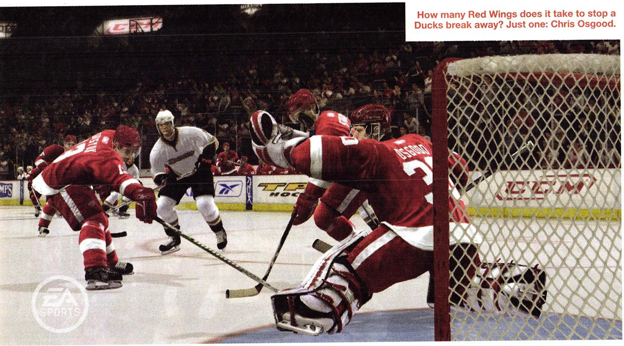


How many Red Wings does it take to stop a Ducks break away? Just one: Chris Osgood.

And the prize for best hockey game of the year goes to...the Calgary Flames!

NHL 09

The best pucking game of hockey this year

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA Canada

PS3 | R

In the world of mainstream American professional athletics, hockey is like pork; it's the *other* sport. Nevertheless, EA has spent the better part of the last two decades serving up a mouthful of puck every year with its perennial *NHL* franchise.

If you know hockey, you know there's more going on than just two teams on ice trying to score; there are villains, bitter rivalries, and shining heroes. In kind, this year's *NHL* entry from EA is without a doubt the champion in shining armor to rival *NHL 2K9's* clad-in-black villain, what with the two franchises having spent the last few years trying to one-up the other in a slug-fest reminiscent of an Ottawa vs. Toronto face-off.

Sorry 2K, but you're a step behind EA yet again. EA struck gold with the Skill Stick two years ago, to which 2K countered last year with its Pro Stick. Well boys, in addition to an expanded Skill Stick—this year's stick shtick is the Defensive Skill Stick, which gives you the same flexibility on defense that you've grown to love on offense—EA has brought a new megaton feature: EA Sports Hockey League.

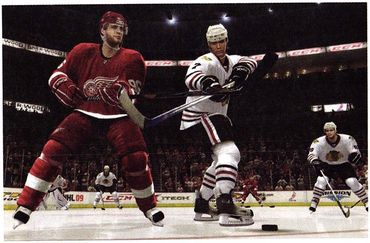
In short, it's a hockey MMO. Yes, you'll play in six-on-six games online with five of your friends (or strangers), taking a created player and molding him into the next Alex Ovechkin. It's enough to bring a tear to Lindy Ruff's eyes. We've sort of run out of superlatives for this feature—it totally changes the way we'll be playing hockey this year. Sure, there's a boatload of other changes as well: the NHL 94 scheme offers easy, pick-up-and-play controls (my four-year-old son was scoring goals on my hockey-fanatic buddy with this two-button control scheme) and it's clear lots of elbow grease has gone into the checking and fighting physics. You'll have more than a few "oh s—t" moments watching how your rivals respond after a good *donner six pouces*. The presentation is still beautiful, especially in the new Be A Pro mode, which features a sweet down-low third-person camera.

In short, if you're a hockey nut and you're trying to decide which game to throw your hockey dollars at, look no further than *NHL 09*. *NHL 2K9* isn't a bad game (read the full review on the next page), but it can't compete with EA's deeper-than-deep Skill Stick and hockey MMO. It'll keep fans entertained well into next year.

Casey Lynch

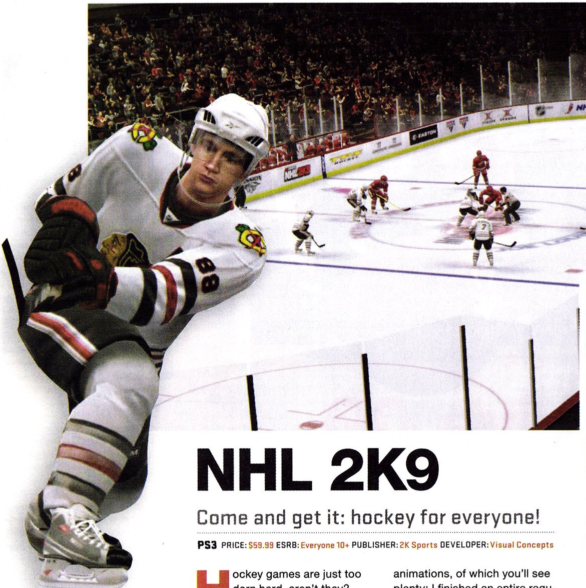
★★★★

The new one-handed deke mechanic gives Marion Gaborik the edge... like he needs it.



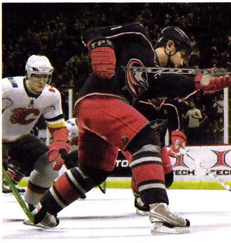
"Gimme a break, guys! Stop hitting my stick. It isn't corked."

Back in the old days, rather than simply dropping the puck during a faceoff, officials would actually have to place it on the ice by hand. Many broken hands later, the rule changed.



Faceoff rule #1: Always have your stick on the ice (looking at you, #7).

Audio Awesomeness: Randy Hahn and Drew Remenda do a good job announcing and the music is appropriately ass-kicking. Note to Visual Concepts: the more Mastodon, the better.

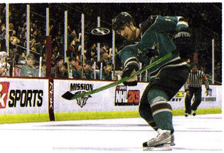


The numerous animations in this year's edition look smooth as ice.

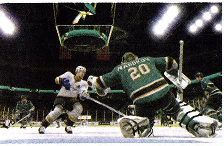
NHL 2K9

Come and get it: hockey for everyone!

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: 2K Sports DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts



This is every defenseman's dream: a clear shot from the point.



Thanks to the six-on-six multiplayer, you can actually play as a goalie.

Hockey games are just too darn hard, aren't they? 2K Sports thinks so, and it's aiming to make this year's *NHL 2K9* a game that anyone can pick up and play.

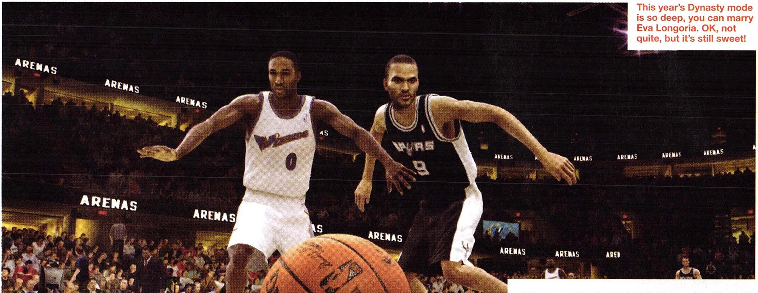
Well, they've accomplished basically that with a new trifecta of control settings: Classic, Pro Stick Evolution, and Hybrid. Classic sees the controls taking a step back to the button-mapped offensive and defensive format from before EA blew our minds with its own Skill Stick analog control innovation in *NHL 07* (which *2K* quickly cribbed last year with its Pro Stick). For those of you who are sick of button-pucking, we suggest the Pro Stick control, which works decently for anything from a quick one-on-one tuck puck to faking out the goalie with an analog drag-n-drop.

A lot of attention has been paid to updating this year's animations, of which you'll see plenty; I finished an entire regular season in addition to playing a ton of one-offs, and I'm still seeing new recovery moves, varied gonzo goalie reaches, and my personal favorite, serious hit-by-puck-collisions. Ah yes, the cup check? That aside, some of the animations aren't as savory, namely a snaggy canned collision animation that hangs you up for a second or more, stopping the action and your momentum almost like those game-pausing damage animations everyone hates in Capcom games (*Lost Planet*, you). Now, it makes sense that you'd be stopped in your skates if Darcy Tucker scrambled your eggs, but we're talking about being jarred by little nudges and bumps. This happened more than a couple of times while we were running a forward to back check only to get bumped, causing us to miss a block while caught in the little "let me compose myself" animation.

Still, the game looks great, plays smooth, and features a six-on-six online component that's not as deep as EA's "MMO hockey game," but is still really, really fun nonetheless. All that said, *NHL 2K9* would be great in a vacuum, but it can't be discussed without considering it against EA's *NHL* series, and this year again it doesn't measure up. Sure the more casual approach is sweet (there's even a funny zamboni clean-the-ice mini-game that's a fun distraction), but it just doesn't light the lamp this year the way *NHL 09* does. If you're only planning on buying one hockey title this season, unless you're a diehard 2K fan, we'd recommend at least checking out *NHL 09* first.

Casey Lynch

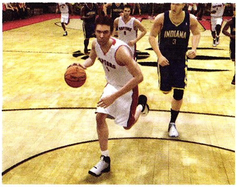
★★★½



This year's Dynasty mode is so deep, you can marry Eva Longoria. OK, not quite, but it's still sweet!

NBA Live 09

Is basketball better when made fresh daily?



Dynamic DNA says Primo Brezic had a great lunch today, which means he's about to snuff Indiana.

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA Canada

If you're like me, you look forward to the fall gaming season with a giddy enthusiasm typically reserved for *World of Warcraft* fanboyz waiting for the latest, greatest expansion. You can keep your MMOs, guys—I want my basketball, and after spending the summer with *NCAA March Madness 08* punishing Georgetown for handing over their Sweet Sixteen bid to Davidson, I'm more than ready to jump up to the pros with *NBA Live 09*.

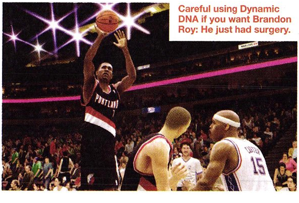
This year, *NBA Live's* newest bell and whistle is Dynamic DNA, which gives you up-to-the-minute stat and performance updates on your players and team. Translation: If you happen to be playing *NBA Live 09* online using the Spurs and Tony Parker suddenly swears off basketball and leaves the NBA for a cameo role in *Desperate Housewives*, he'll quit your in-game team, too. Now, we're exaggerating, that wouldn't happen (we hope), but you get the point: What happens in real life basketball carries over into your game. This can be good and bad: If you picked or built a team or player with a penchant for establishing momentum, you'll be in luck. If your team sucks donkey nuts in the real world, your Dynasty will feel it. Keep in mind, you can elect to play without the Dynamic DNA offline if it isn't to your liking.

Also, if you've passed over the previously unwieldy play-calling features from years past, you should check out a new, much simpler and intuitive play-calling mechanic, which lets you set up juicy picks and bombing rolls. The local and online multiplayer work smoothly enough (online play can shoehorn up to 10 players into one game). Some small gripes: While the character models themselves look better this year, the overall player movement is wanting. Sure, Dwight Howard is appropriately intimidating down low, Kobe has a monster fade away, and so on, but all the players, marquee names included, are a bit shaky, going from smooth movements to locking in and out of animations. It's slight, but you can almost see the code crunching to keep Duane Wade's brow sweaty enough, his moves "movey" enough, and his shorts bouncy enough.

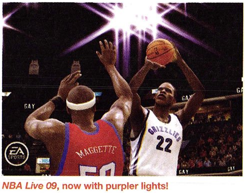
Now, this is the first basketball game of the season I've played, so check back for comparisons to *NBA 09 The Inside*. But small gripes aside, *NBA Live 09* delivers some great basketball and will please most PS3-owning basketball fans.

Casey Lynch

★★★★



Careful using Dynamic DNA if you want Brandon Roy: He just had surgery.



NBA Live 09, now with purpler lights!

The refs must have gotten Lasik surgery over the summer because gone are last year's missed double dribble and wildly out-of-bounds calls.

Getting the stains out of your clothes is the least of your worries.

Siren:
Blood Curse

We're having an episode

PS3 PRICE: $14.99 for 4 episodes, $39.99 for all episodes ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: SCE Studios Japan

This retelling of the 2004 cult classic PS2 frightener, *Siren*, is easily the scariest thing to hit the PS3 since *Lair's* Sixaxis control scheme. Told in 12 downloadable PSN episodes, *Blood Curse* succeeds because of its non-traditional storytelling structure; each spine-tingling "episode" (bookended by recaps of previous episodes and teasers of upcoming ones, like a television drama) is broken into bite-sized chapters that unspool an unsettling yarn about a Japanese village that disappeared in the '70s. Arriving in the town of Hanuda as part of a current-day television crew, you set out to uncover the secrets that engulfed the vanished village and its cursed zombie-like residents.

Blood Curse's bizarre tale is told through seven unique character perspectives, each with their own gameplay style. As little girl Bella, for example, you can't use environmental weapons. Instead, you must rely on finding hiding spots and sneaking past the blood-hungry Shibito (living dead). Hair-raising, to be sure, and we could only pray we weren't spotted as we tried to sneak our way around. Other characters encourage more traditional zombie-poppin' gunplay, like a sharp shooting doctor, who covers the village in Shibito innards.

The frights are further ratcheted by mood-setting audio and visual work. Much of the game unfolds in the dark behind a slightly grainy filter, which conveys a creepy *Blair Witch*–like feel. The sound effects, like Bella's frightened gasps and the distant moans of monsters, are equally spine chilling.

The experience loses its luster with its old-school gameplay mechanics, however. Character control is akin to moving a tank, the camera can be a bear, and the game's defining play mechanic—Sight Jacking, which lets you see through the eyes of your enemies—is often more frustrating than fun. Combined with the already dark visuals and finicky camera, we found Sight Jacking's split-screen presentation more work than worthwhile.

Even with these noticeable problems, *Blood Curse* succeeds because of its excellent episodic storytelling, engaging characters, and amazing fright factor. In spite of its last-gen origins, these scares are 100-percent next-gen.

Matt Cabral

★★★½

The "nurse" might only have one functioning eye, but sneaking Bella past her still makes our hearts pound.

Ferrari Challenge will include Trophies on release. Oh boy, how we love Trophies.

Ferrari Challenge

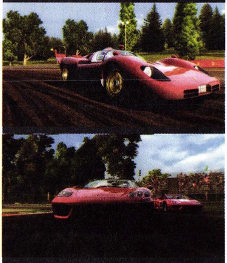
Stuck in third gear

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone
PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Eutechnyx

A couple dozen Ferraris might seem like an astounding number of cars, but when you consider the greater selection and customization options in most contemporary racers, it's tough to get terribly enthused about *Ferrari Challenge's* lineup. Sure, the painstakingly detailed dashboard view is impressive (even if the tiny windshield makes it impractical), and the sense of speed is fitting for these top-end sports cars. But the gorgeous car models make the mediocre track graphics seem dated in comparison, and a laughably neutered damage model encourages the kind of bump-happy jockeying for position that's become increasingly irritating in *Gran Turismo*. The track selection is adequately varied, and online play is functional enough—but on the whole, *Ferrari Challenge* is just plain forgettable.

Joe Rybicki

★★½

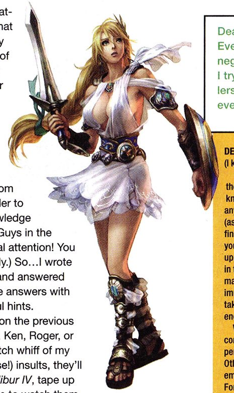


What a shame to take so gorgeous a car for a spin on such a dreary track.

Wonder why you always see red Ferraris? "Rosso corsa," or "race red," is the international auto racing color of Italy.

THE DEAR TIZZY COLUMN

TERESA DIVULGES
SOULCALIBUR IV SECRETS



I grow weary of decimating every opponent that dares to approach my castle fortress in hopes of dethroning my (possibly imaginary) "Bestest-ever Soulcalibur IV Player of All Time" title. Winning nonstop can be such a bore. [Insert dainty and annoyingly calculated yawn here.] So I've decided to take a hiatus from defending my title in order to impart some of my knowledge on you lesser mortals. (Guys in the PTOM office, pay special attention! You could use the help! Badly.) So…I wrote up some reader letters and answered them myself, stuffing the answers with useful advice and helpful hints.

Er, and nobody mention the previous paragraph to Rob, Gary, Ken, Roger, or Scott, please. If they catch whiff of my (totally justified, I promise!) insults, they'll hide my copy of *Soulcalibur IV*, tape up my eyelids, and force me to watch them play again.

Dear Tizzy,
Every time I play online, I get pwned. I have 134 losses and 0 wins. My rank is negative 31. What am I doing wrong? I memorized a lot of different combos and I try to watch my timing, but I just can't seem to win! I already broke 74 controllers because I get so frustrated…Please, Tizzy-won-Kenobi, you're my (and my ever thinning wallet's) only hope!

Angry Star Wars Geek

DEAR ANGRY STAR WARS GEEK,
(I know it's you, Rob.)

Kudos to you for knowing your moves and taking the initiative to learn your character's combos, but knowing how to string together moves doesn't do any good if you don't have time to execute them (as you've learned the hard way). I recommend finding one or two fast "stunning" moves for your character (a leg sweep, a quick-moving uppercut, or a grab) that throws your opponent in the air, flings them to the ground, or otherwise makes them vulnerable for a few seconds. Then, immediately execute the combo you planned, taking care to emphasize moves that keep the enemy pinned to the ground or juggled in the air.

Whatever you do, don't make your favorite combo the only thing you do! It should be performed only when the situation calls for it. Otherwise, it will just hold you back (like negative emotions…that way leads to the Dark side of the Force). While you're waiting for an opportunity to execute your combo, whittle away your opponent's life by throwing in a quick horizontal slash or low kick whenever you have an opening. You'll be surprised at how much better the results are when you use a variety of situation-appropriate moves instead of just favoring a chosen few!

Another good trick is to vary your high, low, and mid attacks, and switch up your timing when you're on the offensive. For ranked online games, I've found it's better to take the offensive right away, instead of playing defensively, because of lag.

Whew, that should be enough to keep you busy for a while! Keep practicing. And hopefully, Angry Star Wars Geek (a.k.a. Rob), you'll get that first win within a few days! (But, knowing you, it'll take weeks…I mean, hi! You're the best, Rob!)

Tizzy

Fashion is the key to victory
Distract your opponent

"Huh? Was that a flash of a pink thong I glimpsed beneath that stern swordmistress's black skirt? Let me try to make her skirt fly up again, just to make sure." And suddenly, your opponent is more fixated on your expertly crafted character's undies than on beating you to a pulp, and you've got an edge in the battle.

Behold the power of fashion! Sure, you can outfit your fighter in just a bra and panties, but the all-skin ensemble is so overdone that your opponent is most likely too jaded to even notice. No, what you need is a twist. An oddity. Something to make your opponent blink and do a double-take, distracting him from the battle just long enough for you to get a few crucial hits in.

I enjoying throwing my opponents off-kilter by hiding XiangHua's distinctively girlish moves in a scrawny, wrinkle-faced man-monkey (that's a man so skinny he looks and moves like a monkey) with a nasal, when-I'm-not-fighting-I'm-molesting voice.

Gary, on the other hand, spent a few hours painstakingly creating Plum Yum, who's based on Voldo's skillset. Plum Yum wears the stereotypical bikini—but her skin is a vivid grape purple. She's actually quite alluring. Gary says his experiment was an epic failure, though. "I spent more time ogling my darling Plum Yum than I did watching my opponents. Ah well... at least I got the last laugh by leaving Plum Yum in her defeat pose on Teresa's TV. She returned to her desk, horrified to see my precious purple petunia suggestively writhing on her screen!" Ah yes, I recall that. And then I deleted Plum Yum, just to prove a point.

So, what are your favorite *Soulcalibur IV* tactics? Got any good fashion tips? If so, we want to hear them (and the boys in the office could use whatever aid you can offer)! Email us at PTOM_Letters@futureus.com.

Dear Tizzy,
My friend invited me to a fighting party he's hosting next Saturday night! The invitation said, "Kind sir/gentle miss, dost thou care to join us for a fighting soiree?" and included an RSVP date (which I replied to) but didn't mention a dress code. This is my first time going to a party! I'm totally clueless about etiquette—I want to be invited again. Please tell me how to act!

Excited but Scared

DEAR EXCITED BUT SCARED,
(Is that you, Carlos?)

Ah yes. There comes a very special time in every gamer's life…the first Saturday evening they spend not in front of their own screen but in front of someone else's screen. Call it a rite of passage. There's an expected code of behavior that you should follow at these types of events:

If you suck
1) Whine and complain. Loudly, often, and in a high-pitched, nasal-y tone. (For variety, try a deep, masculine bass.) Accuse people of cheating. Someone might pretend to complain, but everyone actually enjoys the dynamic soundtrack you're adding to the event.
2) Hog the controller. Don't let anyone else play. I mean, c'mon. You suck, right? So everyone understands you need the extra practice! Refuse to give up the controller. If anyone challenges you, consider it a test—they just want to see how devoted you really are. (It'll affect whether you get invited back.)

If you're better than everyone
1) Trash talk. It gives the party personality (and people will remember you fondly). Be sure to insult people's mothers, pets, breath, and clothing choices.
2) Toy with them. Lure them into a sense of safety, then unleash one powerful move after another without letting them get another hit in. The entire time, shout "Oh! You suck! You totally walked into that one! That must've hurt! Ha!" Cheesing them helps, too. After the party, the host will likely remark, "Remember that Tom fellow? Oh ho ho, he sure loved to wall slam!"

As for dress code, formal black tie attire is expected at these events.

Tizzy

Dear Tizzy,
I'm becoming Voldo! Roooooooaarrrrrrrrr!

Voldo Fan

DEAR VOLDO FAN,
I know you're actually Gary, because that's what Gary said right after Ken said he was going to try a new tactic (hiding behind the dodo birds). But even though you say you're becoming Voldo, you refuse to do any of Voldo's victory dances. Why? I want to see you try them. I'll do Xianghua's in exchange.

Tizzy

Dear Tizzy,
After hearing all the buzz, I rushed out to buy a copy of *Soulcalibur IV*. The problem is, I've never played a fighting game before! Can you teach me some of the basics?

Clueless Beginner

DEAR CLUELESS BEGINNER,
Sure, Ken! Think of *Soulcalibur IV* as a game of chess—it's all about knowing what your opponent is going to do before they do it, and then deceiving them into performing a move (that you know is coming) and then sweeping in to counter that move.

Every move has a counter. The counter to a guard (X button) is to grab and throw (X and Square together). The counter to a grab is to duck and block low (X and Down). The counter to a low block is a vertical slash (Y button) or a low grab. And so on.

Whatever you do, don't fall into patterns. A good player will be able to predict them after a while. For example, if you usually do two low kicks in a row, your opponent might parry the second one. Alternately, if you usually do two low kicks in a row, do one and then do a vertical slash. It'll confuse your opponent. *Soulcalibur IV* is all about mind games.

Oh! And one other thing that trips up beginners: Watch your opponent's character, not your own! How else would you learn what their patterns and favorite moves are? If you don't feel confident enough to perform moves without looking at your own character, you know it's time to invest a few hours in the Training mode!

Tizzy

The way the game's meant to be played

Most of us can't afford to house arcade machines in our basements. We just don't have the cash or the space. Fortunately, we can come close to mimicking the arcade experience with Hori's *Soulcalibur IV* arcade stick.

HORI
SOULCALIBUR IV
STICK
SOULCALIBUR IV
ARCADE STICK

If you've never used an arcade stick before, it'll be a big adjustment. You'll have to go back into training mode to relearn all your moves, but it's worth it. The joystick is more responsive and precise than an analog stick, and the layout of the eight buttons (spread in a downward arc) means you can perform moves all but impossible on a DualShock 3 (though it'll take a lot of getting used to).

The Hori stick also features sturdy, arcade-worthy construction, a three-meter-long wire, a PS button, and a Turbo button (with slow, normal, and fast speeds). Best of all, it's compatible with most other PlayStation fighting games, including *Tekken 5 DR*, *Soul Blade* for the PSone, the earlier *Soul Calibur*s for the PS2, and the *Street Fighter* anthologies (as long as your PS3 can play those games, of course). You can find the stick for around 40 bucks at most retailers. The only downside? It's noisy. Really, really noisy. But hey, that's part of the arcade experience, too, right?

SOULCALIBUR IV

PlayStation Network Games

Booty-licious downloadable games for less than the price of a keg of rum. We say Yea or Nay.

+ **YEA** You'll get full value for your money.

− **NAY** No legs, no fun, no value.

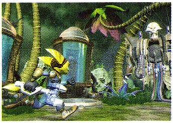
Rachet & Clank Future: Quest for Booty

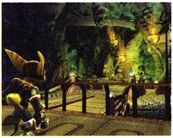
PRICE: $14.99 **DEVELOPER:** Insomniac Games

+ Addiction is a funny thing. Take *Ratchet & Clank,* an utterly delightful run-n-gun action/adventure franchise starring a furry firepower-wielding Lombax and his diminutive sardonic robotic pal Clank. I can't get enough of this series, and I was jonesing for more after the cliffhanger ending for *Tools of Destruction,* the first PS3 outing for the duo.

Despite being a PSN-only release—and a short one at that, clocking in at under four hours of gameplay—*Booty* isn't just a side-mission. It's a full-blown, all-out R&C game, picking up right where *Tools* left off, culminating in yet another cliffhanger (to be resolved in a newly promised Blu-ray sequel). Everything I love about the game is intact: the range of unique weaponry (although the overall count is limited this time), the focus on fun puzzles, the gorgeous environments, the stunning production values. With Clank missing, your move-set has been diminished—although that's been replaced with a greater spotlight on Ratchet's wrench, which can now manipulate certain objects and even carry various critters to help get through different challenges (my favorite being the luminescent green goo-balls who help light the way through dark areas).

The only problem? At $14.99 for four hours and no Trophies, *Booty* is priced a bit high for an impulse purchase. Then again, addiction is a funny thing, and when papa needs his Ratchet fix, he's gotta make a Booty call, no matter the cost. Gary Steinman





PLAYSTATION STORE

Our favorite downloads from the PlayStation Store this month:

▶ THE LAST GUY DEMO

Start practicing your hero skills in this demo of *The Last Guy.* Dash through satellite image maps searching for frightened citizenry hiding in buildings or witlessly roaming the streets. Then lead them to safety points. Just be careful not to run into any zombies!

Age of Booty

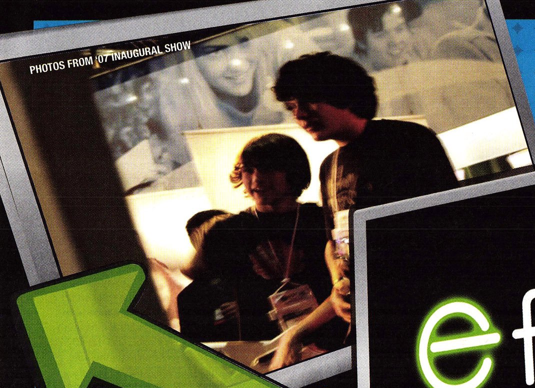
PRICE: $9.99

DEVELOPER: Certain Affinity

+ Screw on a wooden leg and rent a parrot from the local zoo—it's time to sail the high seas. Your goal in this real-time strategy pirating title is to cruise the waters gathering resources (wood, gold, and yummy rum) to upgrade your ship's armor, speed, and cannons. To win each match (they take under twenty minutes), you bombard and capture towns—how many you need varies based on the map. The single-player campaign features 21 challenges and a host of enemy sea captains, including Bloody Mary, Dread Pirate Spork, and several trained monkeys. The maps are well designed and overall, the gameplay is fast-paced and rewarding. My only complaint is that certain missions—the ones that require one team to capture all the towns on a map—create a tedious deadlock 90-percent of the time.

Though the single-player is relatively short, the game's real treasure is in its multiplayer capabilities: up to four players per PS3, with up to eight players total online or via LAN. A robust map creator allows for infinite replayability. If you can find a couple of friends who are also interested in the game, then don that pirate hat, ye scallywag, it be time for some pillagin' and plunderin'.

Teresa Dun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Letters

Feedback, insight, flamewars and real wars

"If there's one conspiracy I truly believe in, it's this: game critics are getting bonuses for using the word "[guess the word!]" a specific number of times per issue."

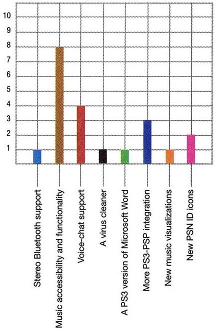
RANDOM QUOTE FROM A CANADIAN EMAIL WE WON'T BE RUNNING

(They perpetuate their own stereotypes, not us!)

"Just because we're hardcore gamers up north living in igloos doesn't mean we should have to suffer, eh. We're more than proud gamers, WE ARE CANADIAN, (eh)." *—David Brohm, Canada*

Dream Machine

We asked what you want to see in new firmware patches. You answered. Here's what some of you wanted this month.



WHAT WORD?!

Game critics clearly have a particular fetish for one strange word. I have no problem in saying that it is the most overused word by game critics bar none. Often used in ways so unrelated to the actual definition, it's so ridiculously cheesy that it's cheesier than complaining about it. The usage of the word is about as vague as my rant at this point. You're all using it, and far too often to describe anything: 1) vicious or brutal; 2) realistic, lifelike, grimy, gritty, earthy, etc. And sure, while it's sometimes used correctly, it really doesn't matter to me. I rue the day the first critic published it and everyone immediately jumped on the bandwagon. I swear to you, if there's one conspiracy I truly believe in, it's this: game critics are getting bonuses for using the word "[guess the word!]" a specific number of times per issue.

Shane, via email

So, uh, Shane, you know what the word *doesn't* mean...but do you know what it *does* mean? If so, you sure go to great lengths to not give an actual definition. Everyone else, try to guess the word! Email your guesses to PTOM_letters@futureus.com.

ONE FLAME...

I don't know why you printed the letter by Carlos Morales in your magazine; perhaps it was the brilliant thesis ("The statement 'PS3 HAS NO GAMES' is full of epic fail"), the eloquent prose ("So whenever some Xbot noob comes rolling by and starts bashing, please give them a nice whack in the face by showing them this list"), or maybe it was just because Carlos said, "PTOM for the win!" Whatever your reasoning is, I've lost any respect I once had for your magazine. Print letters like Carlos' as much as you want, just don't get on your soapbox about how you're above it. You're not. Nobody wants to admit that they're a fanboy, but it's time to face facts.

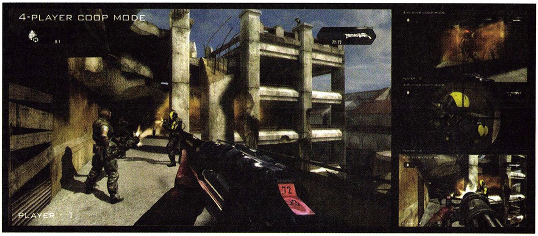
The Angriest Forum Trolling Fanboy, via email

Read the next letter!

AND ANOTHER

Carlos Morales' comments are as laughable as the PSN on a weekend. Okay, I'll concede to *LittleBigPlanet* as the most innovative game ever, and the 80GB PS3/*MGS4* bundle is the sole reason I finally retired my (day-one) PS2. Also, my sons and I love *Ratchet & Clank Future*. But *Killzone 2*? Does it even really exist? *Resistance*? Um, don't you mean Halo1950? Thank Jeebus he didn't bring up *Haze*. *Heavenly Sword/Goddess of War*? 'Nuff Said! *MotorStorm* equals five total minutes of fun. *Warhawk* and *SOCOM*, along with *Unreal 3*, belong on the PC...as do all

LETTER OF THE MONTH

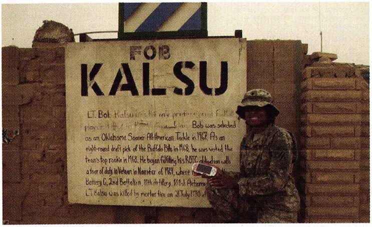


IT'S OKAY, HAVE A COOKIE

In your August issue, you guys reviewed the game *Haze* for PS3 and only gave it two and a half stars. What's wrong with you people!? First of all, many videogames are filled with situations that are complete nonsense, it's just how they are. Second of all, I never saw a single "bland" level. I thought most had an **average** amount of detail in them. You guys also complained about actions that weren't needed, such as dodging when you become part of the Promise Hand. I thought that having a useless move was better than having no moves at all! You people even complained about squad members and enemies popping out of nowhere. I didn't notice that at all throughout the whole game, and frankly I thought the AI was pretty well executed. I would definitely give this game at least four stars and no less.

Rob Hassinger, via email

One question for you, Mr. Hassinger: Have you ever even played another game? Four stars? Really? What's wrong with you!? We've highlighted the part in your letter that proves why we should (and did) give this game 2.5 stars and no more.



"My PSP is getting me through a 15-month deployment in Iraq." *—Keysha Sellers*
(Send your PSP photos to PTOM_letters@futureus.com!)

online-only games. *GT5 Prologue*? While GT5 Complete was the original reason I wanted a PS3, *Prologue* is a $40 demo, you dummy. *NG: Sigma*? Uh, could someone please explain to me how a remix of the three-year old original somehow "balances out" against its true sequel? As for *Tekken 6*...Why? Did *4* and *5* not suck enough for you? Hey, Carlos, did you know *DOA4* is the only fighter being played at the professional level. What else? Oh yeah, *Uncharted*? While it's in my personal top 10, it's just a 360 game masquerading as a PS3 title…I know this because I was constantly reminded by all the kill-count achievement pop-ups. *BioShock*? Yes it's really coming to the PS3. Too bad I already destroyed every awesome bit of it over a year ago. My point is this: Mr. Morales' letter didn't even come close to deserving "LOTM." After reading it, I felt embarrassed for the magazine. It was the same old pathetic PS fanboy verbal diarrhea.

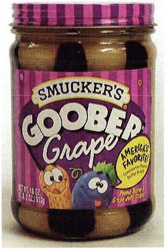
Ken DeCosta, via email

Whew, Carlos Morales' letter sure sparked a lot of responses. The two above are just a sampling. Hey, we print letters for your entertainment (like the two above!), not necessarily because we have an ulterior motive. When fanboys start a flame war, we stay the heck out of it. But we're smart: we duck behind the nearest cover and heat up some popcorn (using the flames fanboys provide), so we can watch. Not sure why, but we just can't turn away.

YUM YUM

I've never written to a magazine, but I'll give it a try. It's getting absolutely ridiculous! I'm talking about all the hackers, glitchers, and teamkillers in the online community. I'm totally astounded at the sheer number. They have ruined every great game to hit the online world. From *SOCOM 1*, *2*, *3* to my now-favorite, *Call of Duty 4*.

I really love this new 2.40 update. The in-game XMB is the greatest thing since they started combining peanut butter and jelly in the same jar. Now, I'm sure that this issue is more on the people who develop the games rather than SCEA or the PSN, but dammit, I'm getting desperate for an answer here: My buddies and I very rarely get into a hardcore S&D match without the host ending the game or it being ruined by teamkillers. They come into a room strapping an RPG or Noob Tube and fire it at the feet of their squadmates to kill as many as possible. Round after round; game after game. How can that possibly be any fun at all? The point is Something Must Be Done before they totally ruin another of our most beloved games!



Erich Holden, via email

First, this isn't the first time you've written to a magazine, because you wrote the exact same letter to us, oh, I don't know, five times in the span of three weeks. So that's the fifth letter you've ever written to a magazine. (Yes, dang it, we count cutting and pasting as "writing"!) Second, the only same-jar PBJ we know of is the Goober brand one, and it's disgusting (except when it's delicious), so we don't know what you're talking about there. Third, yes, Something Must Be Done about teamkillers. We suggest forcing them to eat peanut butter and jelly out of the same jar (with a two-pronged fork!) until they stop.

SADLY DESPERATE

I gotta hand it to you. I love all your coverage but I especially love the letter section in your mag. I look forward to reading them every month dying to see what your smart *$% remarks are gonna be. I literally laugh out loud by myself in the office at work. I guess the reason why I'm writing you this is to see if you can put it in that section and come back with a smart*%# comment. I love it!! Did you guys ever think about coming up with a joke/comedy section?

P.S. If you do end up printing this. You're more than welcome to delete the joke if it's not funny or might think it's offensive.

P.P.S OH PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PRINT THIS! I'LL FEEL SO WANTED!!

Jose Rivera, Bethlehem, PA

Okay. We printed it, but we cut your joke. For fun.

Random Factoid

This month, four people asked for T-shirts (of which we have precisely zero, but maybe we'll make some).

What you're saying about Trophies:

"Let us pick which trophies we want to display on our profile."
–Spike Tereshko

"All I want now are those trophies to be accessible for all games (at least the ones I have)."
–Mike Riffenburg

"I am curious to see how this trophy system works on sports games."
–Jeffrey Nkansah

"There definitely needs to be a way to reward players for the achievements that he/she may have already accomplished prior to the 2.40 release."
–Ben Renner

"I've literally spent about one hundred hours playing *Burnout Paradise* to achieve 100-percent completion, and the same is true for *Metal Gear Solid 4*, as I desired to earn all 40 Emblems (a feat that requires a minimum of eight playthroughs). I'm going to be incredibly sick if I have to spend another 200 hours replaying these games just for the Platinum Trophies."
–"SK"

contact Send your thoughts and comments to PTOM_letters@futureus.com. And keep sending us your PSP photos as well. Because we say so.

Get **Qore** Episode 03 for FREE!

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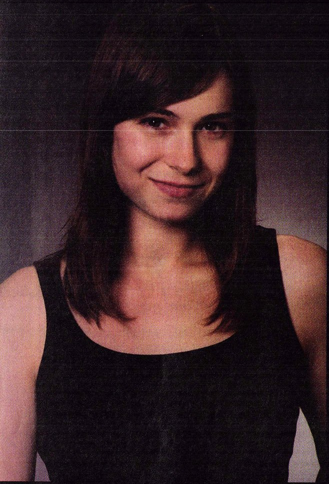

Qore host Veronica Belmont

qore™ August 2008 Episode 03
DC UNIVERSE ONLINE
BE THE SUPERHERO YOU ALWAYS KNEW YOU WERE.
LEGO BATMAN
THE DARK KNIGHT BRINGS SOME GRIT TO THE CLASSIC WORLD OF LEGO.
BAJA: EDGE OF CONTROL
BUCKLE UP PAL, IT'S GOING TO BE A BUMPY RIDE.
DC UNIVERSE ONLINE
Select ✕
SONY

WE'RE AT IT AGAIN! Using the code below you can download, for free, Episode 03 of Qore. Why would you want to do that? Well for starters the team, led by host Veronica Belmont, has scoured the PlayStation world to take you inside the development studio currently working on the hotly anticipated MMO, *DC Universe Online*. Of course, they didn't stop there, so enjoy each of these features (and the mini-games):

DC Universe Online

We go behind the scenes at SOE to give you all the latest on this MMO action game set in the DC universe. With Jim Lee's involvement (he is the Executive Creative Director on the project), this is shaping up to be one of PS3's biggest upcoming exclusives. Make sure you check out the concept art by Mr. Lee—it is really some amazing stuff.

NBA 09: The Inside

Our new "Qorespondent," Audrey Cleo, travels to SCEA San Diego to get her game on with the development team behind *NBA 09: The Inside.* This year's iteration introduces "The Life" mode to PS3, with developing stories for three different players and an all-new franchise mode.

LEGO Batman: The Video Game

Veronica Belmont heads to Hollywood and the Warner Brothers' back lot to see if she can find the Batcave and get TT Games to tell her all about the Dark Knight's adventures in the land o' Legos. Or, is she simply looking for Christian Bale?

Baja: Edge of Control

What happens when a 98-pound woman takes on an 800-hp Trophy Truck with someone named "Pistola?" Check out our feature on THQ's *Baja: Edge of Control.*

Plus, as a special bonus in Episode 03 you can also snag a Qore theme for your PlayStation 3. And, of course, whatever you do...don't press L2.

Please note: This code will NOT activate the Download Center to allow access to the *Resistance 2* beta. Single-episode purchasers of Qore Episode 03 will receive a voucher that will provide access to the beta when available.

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THE FINAL ENCOUNTER

Use ✕ to protect goal and serve.
harge super weapon by playing well.
se R1 or ◻ to activate super weapon.

SINGLE PLAYER
MULTIPLAYER

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Enter the code below into the three boxes, then select continue. Now select download when the Qore icon appears, and voila! Enjoy!

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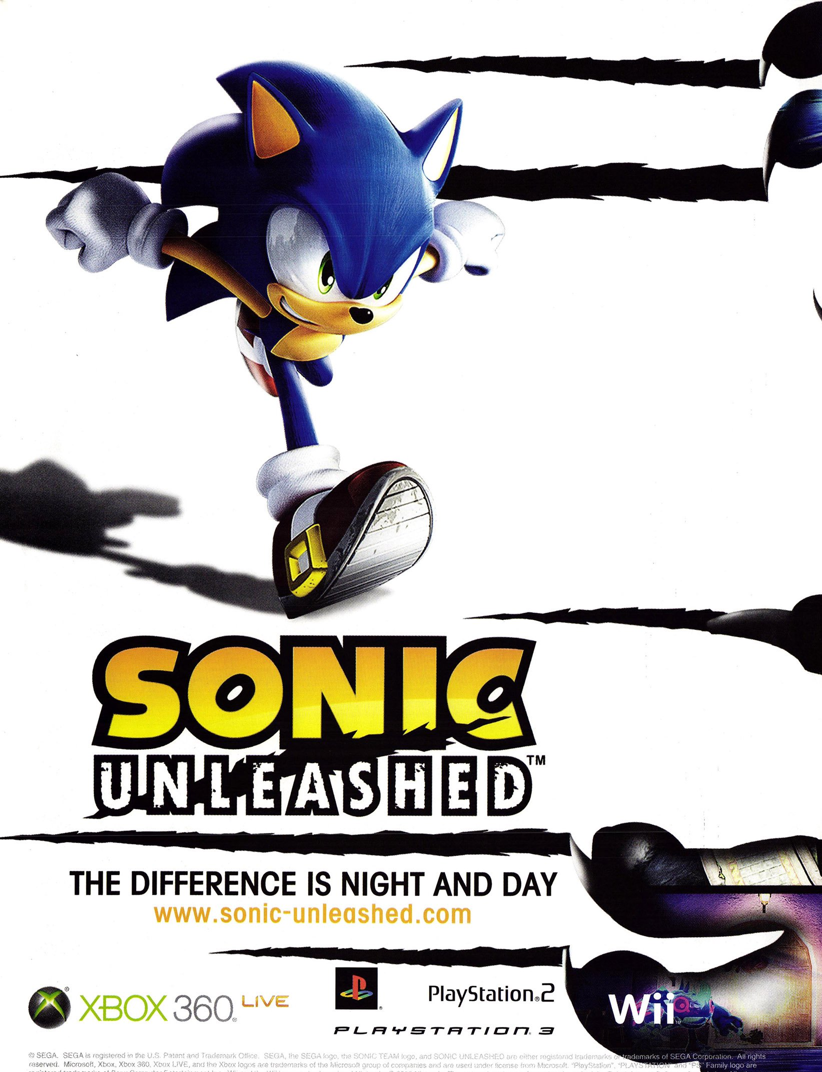

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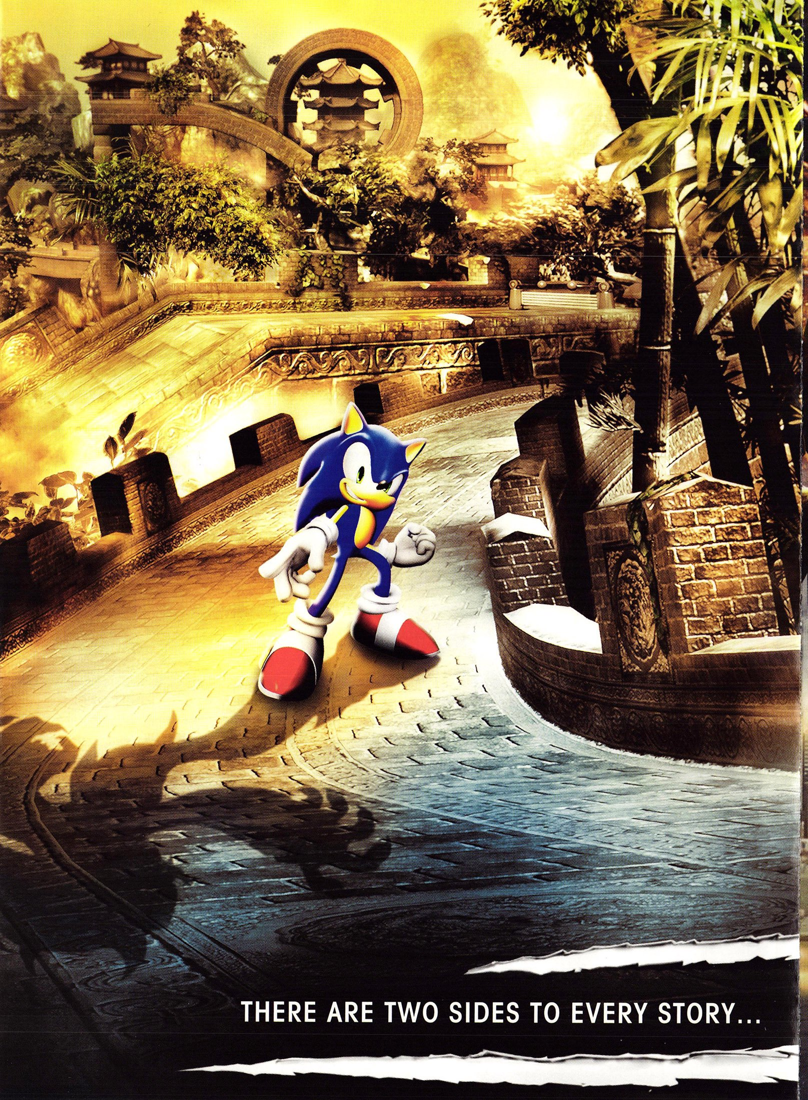
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DESTROY THE LINE
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Intense Violence

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